

SECOND EDITION

CONSPIRACY THEORIES

A PRIMER

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CONSPIRACY THEORIES

A Primer

Second Edition

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Preface

Conspiracy theories currently present at least two societal problems. The first is that the believers can act on their beliefs, sometimes with deadly consequence. The second is that the aversion to conspiracy theories—particularly by those in power—endangers freedom of speech and press as well as the free exchange of ideas. Over the course of the last several years, conspiracy theories have been used to explain the election of populist leaders, low vaccination rates, political violence, and mass killings. At the same time, politicians and journalists have been quick to call for censorship schemes and other regulations of speech. This concerns us: while many conspiracy theories are false and some are potentially dangerous, most are also benign and some are even productive or true.

This short book is a primer; it cannot cover every conspiracy theory (there are an infinite number), every potential explanation for conspiracy theories, or every potential consequence (these are also too numerous). We can and do present the central concepts and debates, examine the popularity of various beliefs and their causes, consider the relationships between conspiracy theories and politics and information environments, and interrogate some of the myths that have developed around conspiracy theories. Some elements of this book may be considered polemical. While this is not by design, it is unavoidable. Indeed, this book addresses truth and power, two topics that frequently spark disagreement. We expect to upset not

only believers of specific conspiracy theories, but also partisans—years of experience working in this field makes this a certainty.

It is likely that everyone reading this book has a relative, friend, or acquaintance who openly believes in one conspiracy theory or another. People occasionally contact us about how conspiracy theories are destroying their relationship with a loved one. We have heard from children and spouses whose parents and partners have become consumed by conspiracy theories to the point where they can no longer hold jobs or have civil conversations—they appear to be shells of their former selves. While we cannot offer a magic bullet or antidote, our hope is that this short book can offer a glimpse into the mind of a conspiracy theorist. Perhaps by examining the inner workings of the conspiratorial mind and properly contextualizing the causes and consequences of conspiracy theory beliefs, we can offer at least a better understanding of the problem at hand.

Social scientists have made many discoveries about conspiracy theories and the people who believe them over the course of the last fifteen years; we hope that we have done them justice by cataloguing their discoveries here. In writing this primer, we have drawn heavily on the text, analyses, and data from our previous works. At the same time, we have attempted to appropriately represent the views of those who disagree. Ultimately, there is still much to learn. We hope that this primer will pique the interest of students and foster a new generation of scholars passionate about studying the nature, causes, and consequences of conspiracy theories.

Joseph E. Uscinski and Adam M. Enders
9/11/2022

1

Why Study Conspiracy Theories?

On January 21, 2020, officials confirmed the first case of COVID-19 in the United States. By then, the highly contagious virus was already responsible for numerous hospitalizations and deaths in China. Nevertheless, many Americans believed COVID-19 was no worse than the seasonal flu. Following President Trump's February 28 assertion that the emerging crisis was "the Democrats' new hoax," about a third of Americans believed the virus was a ploy to derail Trump's reelection campaign. Many of these people acted in concert with those beliefs, shunning best practices and needlessly allowing the virus to infect thousands more. At a time when hand washing, mask wearing, and social distancing would have had the greatest impact on the pandemic's trajectory, information from the prevailing medical experts failed to influence the beliefs and behaviors of many Americans. Disease and death were the result.

By April 2020, COVID-19 patients had filled US hospitals, and ventilators ran in short supply. Yet many Americans believed that doctors were lying about the number of COVID-19 patients being treated. Some asserted that hospitals were needlessly putting patients on ventilators or fraudulently attributing patient deaths to

COVID-19. Others, hoping to uncover the supposed scam, staked out hospital parking lots with video cameras and attempted to document the lack of COVID-19 patients and casualties. One train engineer even attempted to ram his train into a Navy hospital ship; he claimed he “was going to draw the world’s attention” so people could see the truth for themselves.¹

Even some medical professionals endorsed claims such as these. For example, Dr. Annie Bukacek, a Montana physician, said the public was “being terrorized” by scheming politicians into relinquishing their freedom.² As infections increased, arguments like this became more prominent in both traditional and social media. In *Plandemic*, an online video viewed millions of times in 2020, Dr. Judy Mikovits, a scientist, accused health officials, including the CDC’s Dr. Anthony Fauci, of engineering the pandemic. Mikovits further argued that wearing a mask activates people’s “own virus,” thereby making them sick. She also claimed that “sequences” in the soil and “healing microbes in the ocean” could prevent or cure COVID-19.³

Even though such claims lacked evidence and contradicted the medical consensus, many nevertheless believed they were victims of an elaborate plan to control the population with fear and intimidation. In response to actions taken by various governments to protect public health, protestors demanded that politicians lift their emergency orders, lockdowns, and mandates. At one anti-lockdown protest in Michigan, armed protesters carried signs reading “Make treason punishable by hanging” and “Tyrants get the rope.”⁴

While a third of Americans believed that the effects of COVID-19 were being exaggerated to hurt the incumbent president’s chances at reelection, a similar proportion believed the opposite—that the virus was a bioweapon, created or spread to purposely injure people. Some speculated that a foreign adversary like China or Russia had intentionally deployed it. These ideas were fueled in part by speculation—including by US senator Tom Cotton (R-AR)—that the virus had originated in a lab (one of several origin stories that remains disputed as of this writing). Just as others eschewed social distancing and other best practices because of their belief that the pandemic was being exaggerated, those believing that COVID-19 was a bioweapon overreacted by hoarding essential goods, thereby needlessly stressing distribution systems and

creating shortages for toilet paper and other household items.⁵

5G technology was also cited as another cause of the pandemic by some conspiracy theories. There exists no evidence that cell phone towers—5G or otherwise—spread viruses. Yet many were convinced that the newly erected towers had *something* to do with COVID-19. For example, actor Woody Harrelson shared a video on social media purporting to show imagery of China dismantling 5G towers in Wuhan—to stop the virus, of course! However, the footage depicted attacks on surveillance towers in Hong Kong *a year before* the pandemic had begun. Regardless, Harrelson’s post was viewed by hundreds of thousands online, and fears of 5G motivated numerous attacks against cellular towers and technicians across the UK and Europe.

Unsubstantiated claims about vaccines also circulated widely during the pandemic. Some accused pharmaceutical companies of manufacturing the pandemic so they could reap billions by selling a phony vaccine; others suggested that COVID-19 vaccines would change people’s DNA, cause infertility, or, in conjunction with exposure to 5G waves, cause people to become magnetized. Still others suspected that the vaccines were part of a population control scheme. Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan, for example, argued that COVID-19 vaccines were “free shots of toxic waste” and part of a “Death Plan.”⁶ In response to the efforts of the Gates Foundation (funded by former Microsoft CEO Bill Gates) and the World Health Organization to improve global health outcomes and bring a COVID-19 vaccine to market, political commentator Candace Owens remarked, “You are both absolute scum.”⁷ Owens maintained that “there is absolutely no sum of money any person could pay me to touch the Covid-19 vaccine.”⁸ Those who endorsed these and similar views about COVID-19 also expressed, perhaps unsurprisingly, a refusal to take the COVID-19 vaccine once available. Attitudes and behaviors such as these continue to jeopardize herd immunity, allowing the virus to mutate and spread.

When the COVID-19 vaccines were distributed in early 2021, some online communities argued that global elites would force people off regular food as part of what they called the “Great Reset.” Proponents argued that “a drastic reduction in living standards” would follow the pandemic, forcing people to put “bugs, weeds, and sewage on the menu,” while elites would “continue to feast on the finest cuisine.”⁹ Similar groups feared the government

would begin invasive COVID-19 testing with public anal swabs. As one believer alleged, “It’s about discomfort and humiliation and not really about a pandemic.”¹⁰

Many Americans, including prominent political leaders, believed that ultraviolet light, household disinfectants, warm weather, the malaria drug hydroxychloroquine, and ivermectin, a drug used for parasitic infections, could prevent or cure COVID-19, despite a dearth of evidence (and even countervailing evidence, in some instances). Radio host Alex Jones claimed his supplements could kill “the whole SARS-corona family at point-blank range,” and televangelist Jim Bakker highlighted a silver solution on his show, claiming that it was effective against COVID-19 infections.¹¹ Conveniently, both hosts had products available for purchase on their websites even though neither provided evidence that those products actually worked as claimed. Government agencies eventually acted against both Jones and Bakker, but perhaps too late—thousands had already invested their resources into the useless measures.

The governmental and intergovernmental agencies charged with studying and managing the pandemic recognized quickly that the various poorly evidenced and unevidenced claims about the virus and pandemic were more than just a nuisance. For example, after Trump discussed the use of hydroxychloroquine to prevent COVID-19 in a nationally televised press conference, prescriptions for hydroxychloroquine spiked, despite there being little evidence that it was even safe for COVID-19 patients. Acting on Trump’s unfounded claims, an Arizona couple ingested a chemical found in fish tank cleaner that sounded similar to “hydroxychloroquine.” As a result, one of the individuals died, and the other was hospitalized. The danger of people acting in such ways promoted various governmental and nongovernmental organizations to divert precious time, effort, and resources away from fighting the pandemic to fighting what they termed an “infodemic.”¹²

On the one hand, the COVID-19 pandemic showcased how institutions could cooperate, share resources, and solve global problems. A vaccine—never mind *numerous highly effective vaccines*—would not have been possible, especially within a span of months, in previous eras of human history. In many ways, this was nothing short of a miracle—a tremendous accomplishment of science and government. However, the pandemic also revealed that beliefs are

frequently untethered to evidence and expertise, meaning that the effects of scientific accomplishments may be blunted by a misunderstanding or distrust of scientific evidence.

Of course, dubious ideas about COVID-19 were not confined to the United States—each country had its own set of beliefs about the pandemic. For example, many people outside the United States believed the virus originated in the United States rather than in China. It would take pages to list all the dubious ideas about the pandemic that became popular across the world, but the central point is this: many beliefs about COVID-19—in the United States and elsewhere—were not supported by the best available evidence and some even led to dangerous or deadly behaviors.

2020 and Voter Fraud

The various claims of subversion and subterfuge during the pandemic only became more heated and intertwined with politics as the 2020 presidential election cycle proceeded. Unlike in 2016, when accusations of possible election fraud emanated mostly from the Trump campaign (who won the election!), both Republicans and Democrats expressed fears that they would be cheated in 2020. Many of these fears, which were promoted and reinforced by political leaders, regarded concerns about the practical mechanics of voting during a pandemic. Trump claimed that mail-in ballots would be a “disaster,” giving way to massive voter fraud. Large numbers of Republicans agreed. Congressional Democrats, on the other hand, argued that Trump would use the postal service to disrupt the delivery of ballots. Former presidential candidate Hillary Clinton even publicly warned Joe Biden not to concede the election under any circumstances if he lost.¹³ Taking cues from their leaders and sympathetic media, 70 percent of Democrats believed that Trump would not leave office if defeated, 54 percent believed Trump would interfere with the delivery of ballots, and 15 percent believed Trump would cancel the election.¹⁴

Despite the various accusations of wrongdoing, the 2020 presidential election occurred without evidence of widespread, consequential voter fraud, and Trump left office as mandated. However, prior to vacating the White House, Trump, his legal team, his allies in Congress, and many conservative media personalities argued that the election had been elaborately rigged by, among

many other supposed villains, the CIA, Venezuela, China, state-level officials, and Dominion, a company that manufactures voting machines. These accusations are often referred to as the “Big Lie.” Even after Trump’s legal challenges were dismissed by various courts and even his own attorney general, upwards of 80 percent of Republicans continued to believe they had been cheated.



Figure 1-1. The Capitol was breached on January 6, 2021, by rioters angry with the outcome of the 2020 election. GettyImages

These beliefs came to a head on January 6, 2021, when an angry mob of Trump supporters unlawfully rioted at, entered, and proceeded to attack the US Capitol building after attending a rally in support of Trump’s effort to “stop the steal.” Soon after this incident, two-thirds of Republicans adopted the idea that Antifa—a left-leaning anarchist/communist group—had orchestrated the riot.¹⁵ Others suggested that the FBI had orchestrated it. There is no evidence that anyone other than Trump and his supporters were involved in planning the march, eventual riot, and breach of the Capitol building, but there is plenty of evidence that Trump supported and was supported by the white supremacists, militia members, and political extremists that participated in the riot.

Even two years after the 2020 election, a majority of

Republicans claim that Joe Biden's victory was the result of fraud. Moreover, numerous Republican candidates and officeholders—at all levels of government—have argued that the 2020 election was rigged and that election reforms were needed to prevent election rigging in the future. Empowering individuals animated by such unsubstantiated beliefs may put future elections at risk.

The COVID-19 pandemic and 2020 presidential election are certainly not the only major historical events to be questioned; they are just some of the most recent in a long line of events that many people blamed on the malign actions of shadowy actors. Not only have previous pandemics and elections been the subject of much yarn spinning, but wars, natural disasters, terrorist attacks, and mass shootings, for example, also regularly result in accusations of conspiracy. The assassination of President John Kennedy on November 22, 1963, is a classic example.

Even though the Warren Commission, headed by the venerable chief justice of the Supreme Court Earl Warren, ruled that the 1963 shooting was carried out by one man, Lee Harvey Oswald, many have proposed alternative narratives not only about the assassination but also about those who investigated it. An ever-growing cast of characters has been accused of conspiring to assassinate Kennedy and to cover the conspiracy up, including (but not limited to!) then vice president Lyndon Johnson, the military, various defense contractors, Fidel Castro, the Soviet Union, the FBI, the CIA, the Secret Service, the Dallas Police, the Mafia, the New Orleans gay community, and a defrocked pedophile priest.

Six years after the JFK assassination, in what is commonly considered one of the greatest achievements of humankind, Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin broke out of Earth's atmosphere, traveled more than 237,000 miles through space, and walked on the moon. Perhaps even more astonishing, their achievement was watched by an estimated 650 million people on live television.¹⁶ Upon returning to Earth, the astronauts received a hero's welcome for their bravery, and the success of the Apollo 11 moon landing led to five more missions to the moon. But many people doubt that any such landing took place.

For most Americans, the moon landings are a point of pride: a

sign of their collective ingenuity and a testament to their resolve during the Cold War. But for others, the moon landing is not what it seems. Some argue that the United States, intending to defeat the Soviet Union, devised a plan to trick its rival into believing that US technological capacity had surpassed their own. Others, reaching for a supernatural explanation, contend that the US government is influenced by demonic forces who are attempting to trick the world into doubting the cosmological pronouncements in the Bible by faking moon missions. Still others think that the moon cannot be reached by humans because it is actually a base occupied by malevolent alien overlords who watch us from afar.

Other observers contend that the moon landings did happen but just not in the way authorities would have us believe. Some claim that alien bases were found by astronauts, and that this amazing discovery is being kept from the public. Others contend that the camera footage of the moon landing was faked to guarantee a positive image of the event. To wit, the acclaimed film director Stanley Kubrick is often accused of creating the phony footage for the government and then admitting (in secret code) to his involvement, in his iconic 1980 film *The Shining*.

The alternative accounts involving supposed conspiracies behind the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2020 presidential election, the Kennedy assassination, and the moon landing—which we will refer to as “conspiracy theories”—suggest either that (1) powerful actors are secretly seeking money or power at the expense of the unsuspecting public or that (2) epistemological authorities such as government bodies, the media, scientists, and academia—those responsible for discovering and disseminating truth—are corrupt, untrustworthy, and engaged in active deception. In the first case, the accusations scapegoat and demonize a group of people based upon dubious evidence. In the second case, the accusations discredit the institutions that generate and disseminate knowledge.

That people believe and sometimes act on ideas that implicate others in a conspiracy for which there is no evidence is a serious problem we should all wish to solve. It is also the overarching purpose of this book: to explore the reasons why people believe conspiracy theories, to understand the effect these theories may have on individuals and societies, and to consider what should (or should not!) be done about it.

Like the events detailed above, conspiracy theories surround

most events that receive prominent news coverage. The assassinations of President John Kennedy and his brother Robert Kennedy have been lightning rods for conspiracy theories since the 1960s. The high-profile mass shootings in Orlando and Parkland, Florida, Las Vegas, and Sandy Hook, Connecticut, are referred to by some as “false flag” attacks orchestrated by the government and intended to curtail gun rights.¹⁷ These theories allege that these shootings did not take place as reported or did not take place at all; they have also motivated attacks on the families of slain children and been the subject of recent high-profile lawsuits against those who have propagated them. Election outcomes, in the United States and abroad, are often called into question by conspiracy theories claiming that the contest was rigged in favor of the winner.¹⁸ Downed airplanes typically attract conspiracy theories (e.g., TWA Flight 800, United Airlines Flight 93, Amelia Earhart’s final voyage); for example, the disappearance of Malaysia Airlines flight 370 in 2014 quickly became fodder for conspiracy theorists after it vanished from radar and wreckage could not be located.¹⁹ Terror attacks, such as those of September 11, 2001, in New York and Washington, DC; July 7, 2005, in London’s underground system; or December 12, 2015, in Paris, France, have all encouraged conspiracy theorizing among those who believe the attacks were coordinated by governments to justify the sapping of personal liberties.²⁰

Conspiracy theories also surround smaller, lesser-known events that fail to attract widespread attention and leave an indelible mark on history.²¹ Consider, for example, Jade Helm conspiracy theories, which addressed a 2015 US military training exercise in Texas: some Texans began to believe that the military exercise in their state was a cover for an attempt to invade the state.²² Given that there was no such invasion, the conspiracy theories dissipated and are largely now forgotten. Besides specific events, social, political, and economic circumstances and conditions such as wealth inequality and racial and gender disparities can spark accusations of conspiracy, usually that some ill-intentioned group has worked in secret to bring those conditions about for their personal gain.

Conspiracy theories frequently drive policy discussions; indeed, there are hardly any policy areas that do not have at least a few conspiracy theories attached to them. Some people believe that bicycle-sharing programs and land-use policies are scams intended

to steal local control from residents and hand power to corrupt international organizations intent on instituting communism or some form of tyranny.²³ Debates have raged for more than fifty years about the regulation of fluoride in drinking water. Some people on the political right in the 1950s feared that communists were using fluoride to “dumb down” the population; more recently, left-wing activists have espoused the belief that big corporations are behind a plot to poison people.²⁴ Immigration policy is also often intertwined with conspiracy theories: many Europeans believe the “white replacement theory,” that governments and corporations are replacing whites with cheap foreign labor.²⁵ Some individuals have acted on these conspiracy theories by committing violent atrocities, such as the 2019 mass shooting in Christchurch, New Zealand, that killed fifty-one and injured forty. In the United States, a caravan of immigrants seeking asylum at the southern border attracted conspiracy theories involving billionaire philanthropist George Soros; these ideas led Robert Gregory Bowers to murder eleven innocents at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 2018.²⁶ In 2022, eighteen-year-old Payton Gendron opened fire with a rifle at a Buffalo, New York, grocery store, killing ten people; his 180-page manifesto expressed belief in white replacement theory.²⁷

Government agencies, particularly powerful ones, attract the ire of conspiracy theorists. The US Federal Reserve, the CIA, and the military have long attracted conspiracy theories; across the pond, the European Union is frequently accused of hiding secret plans of further integration and of building a clandestine army.²⁸ Wars are often interpreted through accusations of conspiracy as well: for instance, some believe that President Franklin Roosevelt allowed the attack on Pearl Harbor so he could justify entering World War II; in the same vein, many opposed the 2003 US invasion of Iraq because they believed it was secretly a war for oil.²⁹



Figure 1-2. Some people believe that Earth is flat rather than spherical, with an ice ring that prevents the oceans from pouring off.

GettyImages

Even scientific findings that are backed by majority consensus of scientists are called into question by conspiracy theories. A small number of people believe that Earth is flat rather than spherical. The “flat earthers” contend that the flat Earth “disc” is surrounded by an ice barrier (which keeps the oceans from pouring over the edge).³⁰ Flat Earth conspiracy theories ignore the findings of government agencies and the experiences and expertise of airplane pilots, geographers, cosmologists, physicists, and astronauts. Another group believes, conversely, that the earth is indeed spherical but is hollow and inhabited below the surface by otherworldly beings.

A much larger percentage of Americans believe that Earth is not experiencing climate change due to human-made carbon emissions but rather is either not warming or is warming due to some factor unrelated to human activity. To make their case, climate deniers usually accuse climate scientists of either faking findings to reap money from ill-begotten grants or of being pawns in a plan to enslave the planet under totalitarian rule.³¹

Similar accusations have been made at scientists who study the safety of genetically modified foods (GMOs): despite extensive studies attesting to their safety, scientists and agriculture companies—sometimes called “Big Ag”—are accused of faking research for powerful interests.³² Some conspiracy theories suggest that biotech companies are profiting from selling unhealthy GM vegetables; others contend that they want to take over the world by depopulating the planet.³³ Vaccines, once held in high regard because they save millions of lives by preventing diseases, are now vilified by conspiracy theories. Anti-vaxx conspiracy theories, as they are known, are partially responsible for recent outbreaks of diseases once thought eradicated, like measles.³⁴ More recently, anti-vaxx theories have surrounded the COVID-19 vaccine, claiming that the vaccines contain aborted fetuses, are satanic, can alter recipients’ DNA, or can turn recipients into human magnets. Numerous celebrities and politicians in the last two decades have brought much attention to the anti-vaccine movement; these include former president Donald Trump, former Republican vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin, professional basketball player Kyrie Irving, tennis player Novak Djokovic, Green Bay Packers quarterback Aaron Rodgers, comedian Rob Schneider, political commentator Bill Maher, actor Robert De Niro, actor Jim Carrey, and television personality Jenny McCarthy, just to name a few.³⁵ More generally, conspiracy theories also attack the effectiveness of modern medicine and suggest that the medical establishment is covering up the effectiveness of alternative natural treatments so that they can profit from selling expensive, less effective ones.³⁶ Ironically, many of these anti-modern medicine conspiracy theories are promoted by people who are themselves guilty of what they accuse others of doing: selling questionable, untested treatments.

As we have hopefully made clear, there are an infinite number of conspiracy theories out there. They run the gamut in terms of what they attempt to explain and, in doing so, collectively accuse

nearly everyone of taking part in one conspiracy or another. In the United States, frequent targets of prominent conspiracy theories have included Jews, Catholics, Muslims, Mormons, Christians, atheists, women's groups, Republicans, Democrats, conservatives, communists, socialists, liberals, moderates, extremists, government agencies, foreign governments, foreigners, and the media—just to name a few.

Why Are Conspiracy Theories Important?

Conspiracy theories are frequently entertaining. They are tales of schemes and skullduggery, of foul villains and sympathetic victims. By offering a glimpse into a world of intrigue, they dazzle our imaginations. Many popular movies and television series have been at least partially based on conspiracy theories—*The X-Files*, *Lost*, *Fringe*, *In Search Of*, *Ancient Aliens*, and Oliver Stone's *JFK* come to mind. There are conferences dedicated to conspiracy theories, such as those about QAnon and flat Earth, during which attendees can enjoy comradery with the like-minded. In 2016, a cruise themed around conspiracy theories—the Conspira-Sea Cruise—advertised that passengers could heal from the conspiracies perpetrated upon them, all while watching for alien visitors in the night sky.³⁷

This being said, conspiracy theories are more than just “parlor games about who shot John Kennedy or who probed whom at Roswell, New Mexico.”³⁸ Indeed, there are many reasons we should be interested in, if not outright concerned with, conspiracy theories.

The first reason we should be concerned with conspiracy theories is that foiling, exposing, and preventing real conspiracies is a public good. If a conspiracy theory is true, and widespread fraud or serious attacks upon our basic ground rules are indeed taking place, then it is imperative that the conspirators be stopped, held accountable for their actions, and perhaps made to make amends. Further, the public should be made aware of such conspiracies so that similar mischief is less likely to occur in the future.

But what if a conspiracy theory is not true; does it still have value? Yes, it could. Our epistemic authorities—the bodies of experts that are tasked with generating knowledge about the topics for which they possess expertise (e.g., scientists, investigators)—are not right all the time. Sometimes they are wrong by accident, and other times they are wrong by design. In either case, continued

advocacy can help expose and correct mistakes. Even if specific conspiracy theories miss the mark, they can form the basis of successful appeals, thereby overturning incorrect verdicts. In this sense, conspiracy theories can make the case for increased transparency. For example, we know far more about the Kennedy assassination and 9/11 terror attacks because people—some of whom we might label “conspiracy theorists”—questioned the official narratives and demanded additional details.³⁹ Over the long term, conspiracy theories could potentially incentivize good behavior: if the powerful intend to conspire, conspiracy theorists will be watching, investigating, and publicizing. This is a job that the press and other watchdog organizations should be doing, but such organizations often have their own blind spots and limitations. Conspiracy theorists can therefore bring attention to problems that journalists and others miss, ignore, or simply do not have the bandwidth or incentive to consider.

The second reason we should be concerned with conspiracy theories is that beliefs can inform actions, at both the individual and collective levels. If actions are driven by beliefs that are disconnected from our shared reality, then those actions will be not only unwise and unnecessary but also potentially dangerous.

At the collective level, democracy requires that people make informed choices. If beliefs about voter fraud lead large portions of people to abstain from voting, then democracy will function poorly, because many people in the electorate will not have had their say.⁴⁰ Further, their willful absence from participation would likely only alienate them, thereby increasing their willingness to engage in conspiracy theorizing to explain their isolation. The simplest solution to this problem might involve encouraging conspiracy theorists to participate, although this could have negative consequences as well. If majorities make political decisions based on dubious conspiracy theories, those decisions could be incredibly dangerous, since they are both binding and backed by authoritative force.

Consider the United Kingdom’s European Union membership referendum in 2016, otherwise known as the Brexit vote. Many Britons who voted to leave the EU did so while believing various conspiracy theories, especially those maintaining that the true levels and costs of immigration into the UK were being hidden.⁴¹ Forty-six percent of the people who supported the “leave” position

believed that they should cast their ballot in pen because their ballot would be altered if they were to vote in pencil.⁴² Generally, belief in conspiracy theories regarding Brexit strongly predicted voting to leave the EU.⁴³ The result of this vote—52 percent in favor of leaving the EU—has had far-reaching consequences for the UK, Europe, and the world.

Voters in Turkey, responding to conspiracy theories about a “deep state,” an “interest rate lobby,” and Western agitators, not only elected Recep Erdoğan president but provided him with additional presidential powers in 2017 so he could combat the supposed conspirators. The conspiracy theories were buttressed by a failed coup to remove Erdoğan from the presidency in 2016. The policies that have resulted since have led to the violation of rights on a mass scale, including the jailing of college professors and the overturning of valid election results.⁴⁴

The leaders elected by conspiracy-minded voters may feel compelled to address their supporters’ theories. Consider Texas governor Greg Abbott who gave in to conspiracy theories warning of a federal government take-over during the Jade Helm military exercises. Many local residents believed that the military, under the direction of Barack Obama, was on the verge of invading Texas. Abbott, by directing the Texas State Guard to monitor US military exercises in the Jade Helm region of Texas, responded in a way that gave credence to the conspiracy theories. Ironically, many of those theories were sparked by a Russian conspiracy to agitate Texans with a social media disinformation campaign.⁴⁵

Climate change may be one of the biggest collective dangers faced by the planet, yet large percentages of Americans reject the veracity of anthropogenic climate change, believing instead that climate change is a carefully orchestrated hoax perpetrated by communists, globalists, and unscrupulous government officials to sap our money, freedom, and standard of living.⁴⁶ The lack of public support for addressing climate change is one reason that most governments have been unable to enact meaningful legislation to address it.

In other, more extreme instances, elected officials act more aggressively on citizens’ conspiracy beliefs; throughout history, the result has been witch hunts, genocides, and wars. American colonists, importing the practice from Europe, hanged and crushed “witches” for supposedly conspiring with Satan.⁴⁷ As the trials

dragged on, governments raised the evidentiary standards of trials, thereby excluding the use of spectral evidence (e.g., visions, revelations, and demonic voices). Only recently have the remaining convicted witches been exonerated.⁴⁸ Fears of communist influence in the United States led the government to engage in unconstitutional practices during the 1950s.⁴⁹ Anxieties eventually subsided when it became clear that the threat was not as menacing as some had claimed.

Sometimes officials concoct and propagate conspiratorial narratives themselves in order to justify actions they would take regardless. Consider the conspiracy theory-drenched propaganda Adolf Hitler used to justify his genocidal actions against Jews or the conspiracy theories used by Stalin to justify killing, starving, and imprisoning his detractors. We could, unfortunately, keep listing examples; the point is that conspiracy theories can be extremely harmful when adopted by government officials, because governments are able to act on those conspiracy theories with a monopoly of authoritative force.

Conspiracy theories can also be thorny when acted upon by even small groups or individuals. For example, exposure to conspiracy theories has been shown to decrease people's willingness to take part in pro-social behaviors, such as reducing their carbon footprint or getting vaccinated.⁵⁰ Conspiracy theories can aggravate people to the point of wanting to quit their jobs.⁵¹ Worse, conspiracy theories can lead people to forgo modern medical treatments or to break off relations with family members who do not share their views.⁵²

On the extreme end, individuals strongly influenced by conspiracy theories are more likely to (1) possess a toxic mix of psychological characteristics (e.g., narcissism, psychopathy), (2) exhibit a willingness to conspire to achieve goals, and (3) engage in or accept violence against the government.⁵³ Likewise, anger can be a motivating factor for those engaging with conspiracy theories.⁵⁴

Take, for example, Timothy McVeigh. He was angry with the government's actions during the standoffs at Ruby Ridge and Waco, Texas. He believed the government was conspiring to take away gun rights in order to control people, and he reportedly thought that the US Army had implanted a monitoring chip in his body to spy on him.⁵⁵ In response to what McVeigh saw as a government conspiracy against himself and all Americans, he conspired against the government in 1995, ultimately killing 168 people and injuring

700 by bombing a federal building in Oklahoma City.

In 2016, Edgar Maddison Welch traveled from his home in North Carolina to a Washington, DC, restaurant, hoping to foil a supposed conspiracy he had learned of on social media. The theory, often referred to as Pizzagate, argued that high-ranking Democratic officials, including Hillary Clinton, were running a satanic child sex-trafficking ring beneath the Comet Ping Pong pizza shop in the District. When Welch entered the shop, he fired a round from his weapon and breached a door behind which he expected to find the entrance to an underground dungeon. Instead, he had merely located the broom closet. After his arrest, Welch was sentenced to four years in prison.⁵⁶ In 2018, having been motivated by conspiracy theories about satanic sex-trafficking rings (the same ones Welch was concerned with), a group of armed men began patrolling the Arizona desert looking for the traffickers. The group insists they have found conclusive evidence of such activity (authorities, however, disagree).⁵⁷

In short, when told that powerful shadowy forces are working against the innocent, some people will be willing to fight fire with fire. Luckily for all of us, conspiracy beliefs don't always—or even often—lead to violence, let alone noticeable actions of any kind. Political violence is rare (in most Western nations), and conspiracy-driven violence seems to be even more so. And, even when people appear to be acting in accordance with the conspiracy theories they believe, it could be that they are merely using the conspiracy theory as a justification for actions they would have taken regardless, based on other beliefs and orientations that antedate a given conspiracy theory.⁵⁸ To properly qualify the point, conspiracy theories can and do occasionally lead some people to act and can lead otherwise rational individuals to take part in mass panics, witch hunts, mob violence, and more.⁵⁹

The Popular Misconceptions

Despite their historical and contemporaneous significance, social scientists are only beginning to understand conspiracy theories and their believers.⁶⁰ Conspiracy theories were occasionally discussed in the early twentieth century by psychologists, often as a symptom of mental illness, but they did not become an object of study until historian Richard Hofstadter examined extremist groups in late

1950s and 1960s.⁶¹ Hofstadter famously concluded that a “paranoid style” was typical of American political thought, particularly on the political Right, that is characterized by suspicion of political outsiders and a sense of discontentment with society.⁶² Several historians dabbled in the topic during the decades that followed, but a concerted research agenda did not develop until the 1990s, when cultural scholars showed an interest.⁶³ Philosophers followed around the turn of the century, mostly focusing their attention on the criteria by which the veracity of conspiracy theories should be judged—that is, what counts as a “conspiracy theory,” and what doesn’t?⁶⁴ It was not until 2007 that psychologists began to study the topic in earnest, with political scientists and sociologists trailing along soon after. As of 2022, new academic studies on the topic are being published nearly every day—especially after the pandemic spurred a litany of conspiracy theories about the virus, the vaccines, and the government policies intended to fight COVID-19.⁶⁵

Over the past decade, scholars have shed much light on conspiracy theories. This book will attempt to distill the breadth of our current knowledge. With that said, there is much still to discover. There are many unanswered questions, and the answers researchers provide today may be supplanted by better answers tomorrow as new evidence is discovered. Nonetheless, the available body of evidence shows that many of the oft-repeated claims about conspiracy theories are either untrue or unsupported by the available evidence. Below we consider some of these claims.

Conspiracy Theories Are More Popular Now

Journalists often argue that *now* is the time of conspiracy theory. A 2018 article in Al Jazeera proclaimed that “today conspiracy theories have become the true ‘opium of the masses.’”⁶⁶ In 2013, *New York Times* editor Andrew Rosenthal summed up US conspiracy beliefs in five words: “No Comment Necessary: Conspiracy Nation.”⁶⁷ In 2011, the *New York Daily News* declared the United States a “conspiratocracy” because conspiracy theories “have never spread this swiftly across the country. They have never lodged this deeply in the American psyche. And they have never found as receptive an audience.”⁶⁸

A year prior, in 2010, columnist David Aaronovitch argued that the West was “going through a period of fashionable

conspiracism.”⁶⁹ Six years before that, the *Boston Globe* claimed we were then in the “golden age of conspiracy theory.”⁷⁰ Going back another decade, a 1994 *Washington Post* story claimed that Bill Clinton’s first term “marked the dawn of a new age of conspiracy theory,” even though a *Washington Post* story from 1992 had already asserted that we were then “in an age of conspiracy theories.”⁷¹ In 1977, a *Los Angeles Times* article held that the United States had “become as conspiracy prone . . . as the Pan-Slav nationalists in the 1880s Balkans,” and a 1964 *New York Times* story was certain that that was the year because conspiracy theories had “grown weedlike.”⁷²

It is seemingly always fashionable for journalists to report that conspiracy theorizing has reached its apex, but these reports are offered without evidence. Indeed, there is no systematic evidence supporting any of those assertions. Further, proclamations that *now* is the highwater mark of conspiracy theorizing are made without any precision; indeed, they typically confuse the number of conspiracy theories, the number of people who believe those theories, and the salience of those beliefs. What exactly would we expect to see—that is, what specific, testable predictions—if we were, in fact, in the “golden age” of conspiracy theories? How could we know that the United States has become as conspiracy-minded as the “Pan-Slav nationalists in the 1880s”? What exactly does such a claim mean, and what existing data could support it?

Concerns about clarity notwithstanding, researchers have begun to more carefully interrogate questions about increases in conspiracy beliefs, using repeated polls to track such beliefs over long periods of time. These emerging studies find little evidence that conspiracism, however operationalized, is increasing in the United States or other countries.⁷³

Conspiracy Theories Are Extreme

Journalists often characterize conspiracy theories as “extreme” views or as stemming from believers’ extreme political ideologies. For example, the QAnon conspiracy theory—alleging that a pedophilic deep state was working against then-president Trump—is often referred to by commentators in this way.⁷⁴ Such charges of extremity are confusing on their face because journalists also call QAnon “mainstream” at the same time.⁷⁵ It isn’t clear how an idea

can simultaneously be both extreme and mainstream. Furthermore, such claims depend on how we define “extreme.” Oliver Stone’s 1991 movie *JFK* is based on a conspiracy theory asserting that a pedophilic deep state conspired against President Kennedy—is this film advocating or inciting “extremity”? It depends entirely on how we define “extreme,” but what journalists and others mean by such terms is rarely made explicit.

It is true that people on the political extremes (i.e., extremely liberal and extremely conservative) believe conspiracy theories and may even be slightly more prone to seeing the world in conspiratorial terms than political moderates are; however, political moderates are sometimes more likely to believe in conspiracy theories than those on the political extremes.⁷⁶ JFK assassination theories consistently garner majorities in US polls; white replacement theory has polled close to 50 percent in France; majorities of Brits believed that the EU was hiding secret plans of further integration among European nations.⁷⁷ Such conspiracy theories are believed by people who have middle-of-the-road political views; as such, they are not strictly the provenance of society’s political extremists.



Figure 1-3. President John F. Kennedy was assassinated on November 22, 1963, in Dealey Plaza, downtown Dallas, Texas. GettyImages

We could define the content of conspiracy theories as extreme, but to accomplish that task we would require an objective scheme by which to categorize content as extreme or not. Instead, extremity tends to be determined by subjective judgment. For example, many people who believe that George W. Bush was behind the destruction of the Twin Towers on 9/11 might also argue that the birther theory—that Barack Obama faked his birth certificate—is too extreme to be believed.⁷⁸ Moreover, sometimes the claims of extremity refer to the extremity of the act the conspirators are being accused of, and other times they refer to the likelihood (or lack thereof) of the alleged conspiracy being true. Is accusing one president of killing three thousand of his own people less extreme than accusing another of usurping the presidency? Is accusing one president of setting explosives in one of the world's busiest cities less extreme than accusing another of forging documents and hiding his true birthplace? We do not want to suggest that either of these two conspiracy theories are more or less damaging or more or less likely than the other, but we do argue that making clear, objective distinctions between these sorts of conspiracy theories is subjective and more difficult a task than it at first appears.

Conspiracy Theories Are for the Mentally Ill

Conspiracy theories are often dismissed as a form of mental illness. Pejoratives like paranoid, crazy, and delusional are occasionally used to describe conspiracy theory believers. But conspiracy theories are not necessarily indicative of any *psychopathology* (i.e., a mental or behavioral disorder). First off, polls suggest that everyone believes in at least one or a few conspiracy theories. Unless we want to label everyone as mentally ill, then we should not assume that conspiracy theories are indicative of psychopathology. Second, while some people who believe in conspiracy theories also exhibit various psychopathologies, it is not clear that such psychopathologies cause people to believe in conspiracy theories or that conspiracy theories lead people to develop psychopathologies; the co-occurrence of psychopathologies and beliefs in conspiracy theories can just be incidental. Third, even though those who believe in conspiracy theories are often labeled paranoid, *paranoia* is often self-centric—“someone is out to get *me*”—whereas conspiracy theories are group-centric—“a group is out to get *us*.”⁷⁹

Conservatives Believe More Conspiracy Theories Than Liberals Do

This claim has been made widely since historian Richard Hofstadter wrote about the “paranoid style” of right-wing groups in the 1950s.⁸⁰ However, there exists only weak and inconsistent evidence that the Right is more prone to conspiracy theorizing than the Left in the United States. We will spend more time discussing this in [chapter 5](#); for now, we simply note that polls show that people on the political Left (in the United States) are just as prone to believing in conspiracy theories as are those on the political Right.⁸¹ When we do observe differences, they tend to be small and can frequently be attributed to the content of the specific conspiracy theories in question. For example, if we only examine beliefs in conspiracy theories that accuse Democrats and communists, then our data collection efforts will yield mostly believers on the Right, leaving folks on the Left looking quite sensible. However, if we considered conspiracy theories that impugned corporations or Republicans, then we would find the opposite pattern.⁸² While there remains significant debate on this issue, it appears that both the Left and the Right believe conspiracy theories, albeit different ones.⁸³

Conspiracy Theories Are More Popular in the United States (or in Some Other Place)

Americans like to think of themselves as being exceptional in many ways, but one way they are decidedly not exceptional is in their tendency toward conspiracy theorizing. While more polling across geographic and political contexts is needed, available evidence suggests that conspiracy theories are popular everywhere polling has been conducted, though not necessarily equally popular. Further, conspiracy theorizing in the United States appears similar in nature and scope to other Western countries, like the UK, Germany, and Italy.⁸⁴

It can be tempting to label particular nationalities—even races or ethnicities—as especially prone to conspiracy theorizing. The *New York Times*, in addition to suggesting that Americans are particularly taken with conspiracy theories, has suggested that Mexicans, Arabs, Afghanis, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Iraqis, Africans, Egyptians, Russians, Bulgarians, Italians, Yemenis, and the

gay community are particularly prone to conspiracy theorizing.⁸⁵ The best existing evidence can tell us, however, is that no one country, region, culture, or group has a monopoly on the practice. We should avoid casting such aspersions until more data is in.

Plan of the Book

Thus far, we have attempted to make the case that conspiracy theories are important to study. In the next chapter, we provide working definitions for the most frequent terms used to discuss conspiracy theories, the most important being, of course, *conspiracy theory*. The remainder of this primer will introduce readers to the latest research into conspiracy theories. In [chapter 3](#), we take a deep dive into how many people believe various conspiracy theories by examining recent polling numbers. In [chapter 4](#), we move beyond how many people believe in conspiracy theories and begin considering why people believe in conspiracy theories, with a focus on perspectives from psychology and sociology. [Chapter 5](#) addresses the political causes of conspiracy theorizing, and [chapter 6](#) addresses the conspiracy theories endorsed by President Donald Trump and how those theories supported his presidency. In the final chapter, we discuss how society's information sources affect conspiracy theories and other anomalous beliefs and what methods have been proposed for mitigating the negative effects of conspiracy theories.

We must emphasize that this short book is a *primer*—it cannot cover every conspiracy theory, every circumstance brought on by conspiracy theories, or every characteristic of people who believe in conspiracy theories. That said, the book will provide a broad view of research on conspiracy theories. We must also note that this book will challenge many readers' views about both the veracity of their pet conspiracy theories and the veracity of claims they have adopted about conspiracy theories as a class of ideas. Importantly, conspiracy theories are claims about what is true, and people have always disagreed, sometimes vehemently, about truth. Further, people's understanding of what is true is frequently tied to their political identities, like partisan allegiance and political ideologies (e.g., liberal or conservative). Consequently, readers on the political

Left might instinctually react with incredulity or even anger when we label one of their beliefs a conspiracy theory or charge a political leader on their side with trafficking in conspiracy theories; of course, the same goes for readers on the political Right. None of this is intentional—rather, it is par for the course if we want to provide an honest treatment of a complicated and highly political subject.

It has been our experience as longtime researchers of conspiracy theories that no matter what we say on the subject, someone will take umbrage. Over the past decade, we have been accused of excusing the conspiracy theorizing of one group or another, referring to real conspiracies as conspiracy theories, denigrating courageous truth seekers, and shilling for the deep state. Our inboxes have been inundated with comments such as “you’ve decided to join the losing team right before they’re led to the gallows” and “utterly stupid or actively participating in a conspiracy of silence?” This commentary is par for the course. But, it also showcases the critical importance of a dispassionate, scientific approach to the study of conspiracy theories—the task to which we turn in the next chapter.

Discussion Questions

1. Have you recently heard about any conspiracy theories that were new to you? Where did you hear them? Do they seem true?
2. Close your eyes and picture a conspiracy theorist. Who do you see? What kind of people believe in conspiracy theories?
3. Are conspiracy theories worthy of scientific study? Why (not)?

Key Terms and Concepts

Big Lie

Flat Earth

Hydroxychloroquine

Ivermectin

Paranoia

Paranoid Style

Pizzagate

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2

What Is a Conspiracy Theory?

This chapter takes on perhaps the most important task of this book: defining key concepts. Definitions are particularly important because arguments about conspiracy theories are often focused on what counts as conspiracy theory and what does not. People who believe in a particular conspiracy theory do so because they believe it is true and well evidenced; it stands to reason, then, that they also tend not to consider the idea they believe in a conspiracy *theory* at all, but rather conspiracy *fact*. Herein lies a central problem facing the conspiracy theory concept: people disagree over what is true and what is not. It is possible that this book has already challenged one of your beliefs by referring to it as a conspiracy theory. As we provide a definition for the term “conspiracy theory” in this chapter, we hope you will reflect on why you consider certain ideas to be conspiracy theories or not, and why you believe the conspiracy theories that you do and reject the ones you do not.

Lay political arguments sometimes hinge on definitions, but they shouldn't. Definitions are not fixed, and words have usages (which are often varied) rather than intrinsic meanings. If speaker and listener agree on what the communicated words mean, speakers can

communicate specific meaning effectively. Take, for example, a ubiquitous term like “middle class”: US politicians rarely give speeches without mentioning the “middle class.” The problem is that most people—rich and poor—consider themselves to be middle class. This renders the term complicated, if not meaningless; to make matters worse, politicians often refuse to say what they mean by “middle class” when questioned about it.¹ Thus, if a politician claims they want to give a tax benefit to the middle class, it is rarely clear exactly who would receive that benefit and who would not. While leaving such questions unanswered in stump speeches might be good politics, they would eventually have to be answered when it comes time for legislators to draft, enact, or enforce policy, since “middle class” possesses no inherent legal meaning.

All this is to say that when we communicate, it is important that we agree on how we are using our key terms, lest we talk past each other. Clarity is made all the more important because the term “conspiracy theory” and its variants are often weaponized by speakers to indicate that something is wrong with the theories they are referencing as “conspiracy theories,” or that something is wrong with the “conspiracy theorists” who espouse those theories.² Thus, few people want their ideas to be labeled “conspiracy theories” or themselves labeled as “conspiracy theorists.”³ Indeed, “conspiracy theory” and “conspiracy theorist” are frequently used to deride ideas and people; these labels become dangerous when employed by the powerful to deflect (sometimes legitimate) accusations of wrongdoing.⁴ To avoid this and other pitfalls, conspiracy theory, its variants, and other related terms—as they will be used in this book—are defined below, keeping in mind that other people may use these terms slightly—or even very—differently.

We use “conspiracy theory” and other related terms because they are common and we attempt to use them neutrally. And as we explain below, while we use the term “conspiracy theory” to denote an explanation that has yet to achieve some level of epistemological legitimacy, we leave open the possibility that that theory could be true regardless. Thus, we use “conspiracy theory” as a descriptive term rather than as a pejorative one intended to connote “false.” Some scholars have promoted the use of alternative terminology, but such alternatives are clunky and confusing. For example, some scholars have suggested using the term “state crimes against democracy” in place of conspiracy theory; this phrase seems, on its

face, to exclude numerous ideas that would typically qualify as conspiracy theories by most definitions (e.g., conspiracies by nonstate actors).⁵ In using the “conspiracy theory” label, it is not our intention to adjudicate the underlying truthfulness of any idea, to shield wrongdoers from justice, or to deride conspiracy theorists.

Defining Our Terms

Conspiracy

The term “conspiracy” has several common usages. In our use of the term, a *conspiracy* involves a small group of powerful individuals acting in secret toward some end, for their own benefit and against the common good. Use of the term both in common parlance and in this text (rather than in legal terminology) frequently suggests a large-scale attempt to inhibit rights, alter bedrock institutions, or perpetrate sweeping fraud—most of which go beyond traditional legal definitions of conspiracy. Therefore, this definition excludes planning to commit common illegal acts such as robbing a convenience store, killing a family member for the insurance money, or illicitly selling narcotics. The conspiracies we discuss here can, of course, involve the violation of laws, but that is not a necessary condition; for example, “backmasking” rock ‘n’ roll albums (i.e., embedding into a song a message recorded backward) to create an army of teenage communists does not necessarily violate any specific law, but it would count as a conspiracy for our purposes.

Street gang and Mafia activities are generally excluded from this definition of conspiracy because these groups do not intend to alter bedrock ground rules so much as operate underneath them; terrorist activities are also usually excluded, because terrorists’ intentions are typically well known even if their specific activities are not well known in advance.⁶ This definition also excludes government lobbying and legislative logrolling because these are normal democratic processes, even if they are odious and perceived as an unsavory form of policy making.

An example that does fit our definition of conspiracy is *Watergate*. “Watergate” is a blanket term encompassing a number of activities undertaken by President Richard Nixon and his associates that undermined the rule of law and sought to punish or disadvantage Nixon’s opponents for political gain and then cover up

those activities.⁷ The term “Watergate” stems from the Watergate office building in Washington, DC, where a group of burglars who broke into the Democratic National Committee’s headquarters in 1972 were arrested. As evidence linking the president to the burglary and attempts to cover it up came to light during Nixon’s second term, pressure began to mount on Congress to impeach the president. At the point at which Congress was ready to do just that, Nixon became the first president to resign from office.

We consider the assertion that a conspiracy has occurred to be justified when the appropriate epistemological authorities have judged it as actually having occurred. An *epistemological authority* generates knowledge claims and consists of a “distributed network of agents, trained in assessing knowledge claims, who make their evidence and processes available to scrutiny, within and beyond the network.”⁸ *Epistemology* is the scientific study of how humans gather and build knowledge; it focuses on the difference between justified and unjustified beliefs. More plainly, epistemology is the study of how we know what we know.

An *appropriate* epistemological authority is one who is trained to assess knowledge claims in a relevant area and draw conclusions from valid data using recognized and valid methods. Physicists, for example, are appropriate authorities for making and evaluating claims pertaining to physics, whereas historians are more appropriate for making claims about history. Having expertise relevant to the subject matter at hand is key. Watergate, for example, is referred to as a conspiracy because it was deemed as such by Congress, courts, and many other investigative bodies with expertise, whose hearings and evidence are available and open to inspection.⁹ While expertise is important when it comes to evaluating the truth value of claims of conspiracy, the evidence and the methods for evaluating that evidence must be open so that it can be examined by others and refuted if necessary.¹⁰

Conspiracies happen frequently and should never be overlooked as an important, albeit unfortunate, component of our society.¹¹ Secret malevolent plots are concocted far too often, and some powerful people do secretly attempt to abuse their power. As concerned citizens, we should always be on the lookout for abuse. But just because conspiracies do happen does not mean that any or all conspiracy *theories* are true, warranted, or valuable.

Conspiracy Theory

Conspiracy theory is an explanation of past, present, or future events or circumstances that cites a conspiracy as the primary cause. Like conspiracies, conspiracy theories involve the intentions and actions of powerful people; for this reason, conspiracy theories are inherently political. Conspiracy theories—in our use of the term—are accusatory assertions that could be either true or false, though they contradict the proclamations of epistemological authorities, where such proclamations exist. For example, theories asserting that the George W. Bush administration orchestrated the terror attacks of 9/11/2001 run counter to the investigative findings of the FBI, CIA, 9/11 Commission, and *Popular Mechanics* magazine.¹² Therefore, 9/11 Truth theories, as they are often called, are appropriately labeled “conspiracy theories” rather than “conspiracies.”

In cases where the appropriate epistemological authorities have yet to investigate or reach a conclusion, conspiracy theories assert a conspiracy despite a lack of affirmation. For example, even though the agencies tasked with investigating the disappearance of Malaysian Airliner flight MH-370 had yet to determine the causes of the plane’s disappearance, the countless theories that assert that the CIA, Russia, or North Korea covertly shot down or hijacked the plane are appropriately labeled conspiracy theories.¹³ Sparked by the break-ins at the Watergate Hotel, journalists Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein were chasing down a conspiracy *theory* involving Richard Nixon and his associates until the appropriate investigative agencies determined that there was indeed a conspiracy committed by Nixon and his associates. It is proper to label accusations of conspiracy as “conspiracy theories” and withhold belief in those theories until the appropriate epistemic authorities deem them true (or, at least, likely true or largely supported by available evidence). When this happens, we should change our terminology from “conspiracy theory” to “conspiracy.”



Figure 2-1. The remains of the World Trade Center tower, days after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack in New York City, New York, United States.

GettyImages

In this same vein, theories asserting that Donald Trump conspired with Russia to rig the 2016 presidential election were conspiracy theories prior to the release of the Mueller Report and, given the Mueller investigation's generally unsupportive findings, will remain conspiracy theories until appropriate epistemic authorities amass new evidence that revises Mueller's initial findings. According to this logic, if at some point the appropriate epistemic authorities find one of the many accusations of conspiracy against Trump to be true, that one conspiracy theory should then be deemed a "conspiracy," and every other mutually exclusive Trump/Russia conspiracy theory (of which there are many) should remain referred to as a "conspiracy theory."

The bottom line is that citizens should believe accounts from properly constituted epistemic authorities rather than theories that either (1) directly conflict with epistemic authorities or (2) make assertions that have yet to be fully and appropriately investigated by the epistemic authorities. A conspiracy theory may be true, but people are not justified in believing it until the appropriate

epistemological authorities deem it true. Therefore, well-evidenced conspiracy theories may—should they reach a certain evidentiary bar—provide the grounds for investigation, appeal, and reassessment, but they should not be believed outright.

Someone who believes a conspiracy theory tends not to consider it conspiracy *theory* at all but, rather, fact. This is because, tautologically, when one believes a proposition, one thinks it is true or likely to be true. Conspiracy theorists often claim that their beliefs are justified because they have evidence. But that evidence may not be convincing to anyone other than themselves, and it may do nothing to convince experts in relevant fields of knowledge production. David Icke, for example, has spent decades researching a conspiracy theory claiming that an ancient bloodline of human-reptilian hybrids rule the planet. Icke has published many books on the subject, each claiming to provide concrete evidence.¹⁴ While Icke's small number of followers seem to be convinced of his claims, the relevant experts who would evaluate Icke's claims—biologists, physicists, and others—have not yet presented evidence demonstrating that lizard people, shape-shifting, and interdimensional travel are real.

Each person sets for themselves the standards on which they judge evidence, and those standards are quite elastic across different conspiracy theories. People tend to require more evidence to believe that someone from their own group—perhaps a partisan, ideological, racial, ethnic, or religious group—did something wrong than they do to believe that someone from an opposing group did something wrong.¹⁵ People are also more inclined to believe that they were cheated by someone else rather than that they cheated someone else. When a nationally representative sample of Americans was asked which presidential campaign engaged in “dirty tricks” during the 2012 election cycle, partisans tended to accuse the opposing party rather than their own.¹⁶ Likewise, a study of attitudes toward the act of stealing campaign yard signs showed that people were more concerned when the other side stole yard signs but not so concerned about sign stealing by their own side.¹⁷ A study of attitudes about a recent football scandal signals the same: New England Patriots' quarterback Tom Brady was accused of deflating footballs in the 2014–2015 NFL playoffs so they would be easier for him to throw and for his receivers to catch. However, it remains unclear if Brady had violated the rules in this way, as the

evidence was highly contested. A study of opinions on the matter showed that people from New England (those most likely to be Patriots fans) did not believe Brady had cheated, but people living outside of New England (those most likely to be fans of opposing teams and therefore jealous of New England's championships) tended to believe that Brady had, indeed, cheated.¹⁸ The same evidence for "Deflategate" was available for all to see, but what mattered was how people's loyalties led them to interpret that evidence. In general, people find it easier to agree with arguments that coincide with how they already view the world. When arguments challenge their worldviews, they find ways to ignore or explain away the contradictory evidence.¹⁹ Truth is not subjective, but people view truth through their own subjective lenses and, therefore, come to very different conclusions about the truth value of various claims.

By directly challenging, ignoring, or making appeals beyond the boundaries of knowledge, conspiracy theories often call into question the very authorities charged with establishing that knowledge. For example, conspiracy theories that posit a broad conspiracy to assassinate President Kennedy assert, at least implicitly, that the body tasked with investigating the assassination—the Warren Commission—was either duped, deficient, or dishonest. Those who argue in favor of "flat Earth" theories accuse nearly every knowledge-generating body in the world of being in on a scam to dupe the human population. Epistemic authorities can, of course, make mistakes. In those instances, conspiracy theories can form the basis of successful appeals. But the best way to remedy incorrect verdicts is with more experts, more evidence, and more study rather than the abandonment of epistemic authority and the widespread adoption of conspiracy theory.

The difference between conspiracy and conspiracy theory is sometimes blurry because many people prefer to adopt their own views rather than defer to experts, who could, in people's minds, be part of the conspiracy as well. Again, while it may seem tautological, people believe ideas because they think those ideas are probably true. To be sure, people occasionally misrepresent their beliefs,²⁰ but it is not possible for people to believe in ideas they think are false. Put another way, people do not seek out ideas they believe are wrong and then adopt them anyway just so they can offend others. It is easy to approach other conspiracy theorists by

asking them why they believe obvious falsehoods; but to the believers, the ideas are not false at all—their conspiracy theories are true, and they believe those theories because they are true. The believers are not purposely attempting to thwart reality; they are merely intending to find truth, just like everyone else.

The term “conspiracy theory” and its variants carry with them much baggage, and many believers are well aware of this.²¹ Thus, some believers in JFK conspiracy theories have argued that the term “conspiracy theory” was itself created as part of a CIA conspiracy to discredit JFK assassination conspiracy theories.²² However, there is little evidence to suggest that the CIA engaged in such a scheme, and historical records show that the term “conspiracy theory” was used long before the Kennedy assassination.²³ Further, and as we will discuss in [chapter 3](#), Kennedy assassination theories are among the most popular in the United States; if the CIA was plotting to discredit such beliefs with word games, it did a terrible job.

While we have attempted to provide a specific definition of conspiracy theory, we realize that people use language in varying ways. When other people use the term “conspiracy theory,” they often apply it haphazardly and in a biased manner. Thus, people label ideas about alleged conspiracies they believe in as true “conspiracies” but ideas about alleged conspiracies they do not believe in as “conspiracy theories.” The choice of how to apply the term “conspiracy theory” is rarely evenhanded, based on the accumulation of evidence, or tied to a clear definition; rather such labeling results from gut feelings about the idea in question. The same forces that foster belief in conspiracy theories (which we will address in detail throughout the remainder of the book) also foster views about how consequential those theories are, how much truth value they have, or how “crazy” the believers in those theories are. For example, a Democrat is more likely than a Republican to believe conspiracy theories that accuse Republicans of conspiring than theories that accuse Democrats of conspiring (and vice versa). Just the same, a Democrat will be more likely to view theories that accuse Democrats of conspiring as more consequential but as having less truth value and crazier followers than theories that accuse Republicans of conspiring (and vice versa). There is nothing about a conspiracy theory that allows one to judge its truth value, consequences, or craziness upon mere exposure to it. That said, people often make such judgments after simply hearing a

conspiracy theory—these judgments are bound to be biased and subjective.

Falsifiability

Consider, for a moment, the claim that a teapot is orbiting around Pluto, far out in the depths of space.²⁴ Because of its small size, there is no way for us to observe such a teapot so far away, thus there is no way to see that the teapot is there; just the same, there is also no way to show that there is, in fact, no teapot there. Should you believe the claim that there is a teapot orbiting Pluto or not? A friend of yours who very much favors the teapot theory might encourage you to believe in the orbiting teapot theory as well, arguing that there is no way for you to prove the teapot does not exist—so why not believe it? Wanting to guard your beliefs carefully, you may respond to your friend that not being able to disprove the teapot theory says little about the truth of the teapot theory and that the burden of proof is on them to show evidence for the theory. More importantly, you might argue that the general inability to show that a claim is false might suggest that the claim shouldn't be believed at all. With this response, you would be arguing about the falsifiability of the theory at hand.

Just as it would have been impossible to prove there is no teapot floating through distant space, so too is it difficult to refute conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories claim that the activities of the supposed conspirators are undetectable because they are taking place behind closed doors. They also (at least implicitly) hold that the conspirators are interested in hiding their activities and covering their tracks.²⁵ Conspirators do not want to get caught. Therefore, a conspiracy could feasibly exist with no evidence of its existence. Moreover, a conspiracy could be taking place even though all the available evidence suggests that it is not. For the same reason why it is often difficult to prove a negative, it is difficult to show that there is *not* a shadowy conspiracy avoiding detection. For the conspiracy theory believer, the fact that we don't have good evidence of a conspiracy only demonstrates that the conspirators are good at covering their tracks; likewise, the wealth of evidence that a conspiracy theory is false only shows that the conspirators are good at misleading the investigators, or that the investigators are in on the conspiracy too!

Thus, conspiracy theories are typically *non-falsifiable*, certainly

in the eyes of most believers. *Falsifiability* is a hallmark of scientific thinking: if there is no evidence that could disprove a claim, then the claim—according to some philosophers—should be ignored.²⁶ This might seem counterintuitive at first: Why would not being able to prove a claim wrong make belief in it irrational? The reason, in the simplest terms, is that when evidence cannot prove a claim wrong, evidence cannot prove the claim right either. At that point, the claim enters the realm of theology. Consider the resiliency of birther beliefs. The evidence brought to bear on these claims—Barack Obama’s long- and short-form birth certificates, which have been verified by experts—should have been enough to disprove Birtherism. But the evidence has not stopped committed conspiracy theorists from moving the goalposts.²⁷ When Obama was inaugurated, the birthers alleged he had no birth certificate. When Obama produced his short-form birth certificate, birthers asserted that only the long-form version would do.²⁸ When Obama produced his long-form birth certificate, birthers were still unimpressed and argued that it had been forged. Despite the repeated disclosure of evidence, there was no evidence that could change the minds of committed birthers, because disconfirming evidence could be reasoned away, rendering their beliefs immune to refutation.²⁹

But while the absence of falsifiability does not work in favor of conspiracy theories, it should not be thought of as a death knell either. We should expect that conspirators will attempt to conceal positive proof of their activities, to confuse investigators with red herrings, and to compartmentalize their operations to prevent their cronies from leaking. But because of their non-falsifiability, conspiracy theories should not be thought of as true/false but rather as more or less likely to be true (as, we would argue, should everything—a scientific view of the world is probabilistic in nature). The evidentiary facts presented to support a conspiracy theory can and should, however, be deemed true or false. Consider, for example, the work that the staff of *Popular Mechanics* did to address the evidence put forward by 9/11 conspiracy theorists: while they could not disprove a shadowy conspiracy, they could address the evidentiary claims (e.g., the way in which the towers fell) that were used to support the various conspiracy theories.³⁰

When discussing the veracity of their pet theories with believers, an immediate question to pose regarding falsifiability is this: What evidence can I show you that would convince you that you are

wrong? If the answer is “nothing,” then you may as well exit the conversation.

Other Standards for Evaluating Conspiracy Theories

It would be useful to have a uniform standard for separating the “crazy,” “zany,” and “totally out there and unevidenced” conspiracy theories from the conspiracy theories more likely to be true or “plausible.” Unfortunately, there is no accepted method for doing so. How would one distinguish among unfalsifiable, unauthoritative ideas that experts have yet to endorse as true? Certainly, one could *feel* that some conspiracy theories are more likely to be true than others. But such judgments are often based on little more than one’s own subjective and biased assessments, such that two different people could come to very different conclusions about the relative likelihood or craziness of specific conspiracy theories.

If the ideas classified as conspiracy theories have yet to be judged as true or likely to be true by epistemic authorities, withholding belief from the class of ideas labeled as conspiracy theories is therefore the most consistent strategy—this is because choices about which particular conspiracy theories to believe (or not) would almost certainly be guided by inconsistently applied, subjective standards. On the other hand, to adopt all conspiracy theories would result in one believing in contradictory and incompatible accounts of various events and circumstances that have not been found to be (likely to be) true by epistemic authorities. This is not to suggest that we should ignore conspiracy theories; some conspiracy theories warrant investigation. As more evidence is gathered and evaluated by appropriate experts, further fact-finding and investigation may become more warranted. And when the appropriate epistemological authorities conclude that a conspiracy theory is (likely to be) true, we will then have reason to update our beliefs and consider that conspiracy *theory* a conspiracy.

With this said, epistemologists have offered a variety of standards for judging conspiracy theories. Some—like Sir Karl Popper—suggest that conspiracy theories should be abandoned because they posit impossible or unfalsifiable claims, contradict epistemic authority, and are usually not the best or most likely explanation for events or circumstances.³¹ Other scholars, like philosopher Brian Keeley, don’t believe that conspiracy theories should be dismissed outright; rather, they should be dismissed when

the number of conspirators involved in the theory increases beyond the point where secrecy could be reasonably maintained.³² Keeley notes that many conspiracy theories must be expanded in scope in order to explain why they have avoided exposure (e.g., the entire national media is also in on the conspiracy because it is not allowing the public to see the evidence!). The problem, as Keeley notes, is that the more actors involved in a supposed conspiracy, the more likely the scheme is to fail, because secrecy cannot be maintained among large groups.³³ Other philosophers suggest that conspiracy theories should be rejected when other explanations seem more likely.³⁴ For example, philosopher Pete Mandik sums up his argument in two words: “Shit Happens!” Mandik argues that just because something strange or unusual occurred does not mean there was a shadowy conspiracy behind it. Sometimes called “cock-up theories,” explanations of events and circumstances that put the causal locus on coincidence, chance, and accident are often better explanations than conspiracy theories.³⁵

Other scholars have attempted to formulate the conditions under which we should believe in conspiracy theories, arguing that believing a conspiracy theory is entirely rational in some instances.³⁶ Others still argue that authoritative accounts should be discarded and the conspiracy theories entertained when the evidence in favor of the official account would give the impression of having been planted. For example, researchers point to the intact passport belonging to one of the 9/11/2001 hijackers found near the World Trade Center, inferring that it is simply too convenient for it to have escaped the crashed airliner unscathed.³⁷ One obvious problem with this standard is that any evidence for an official story could be deemed as “too convenient” by someone who was determined to undermine the official account.

Standards such as these can be helpful in thinking through which conspiracy theories might be worthy of further consideration and investigation, but they often leave much room for subjective judgment, thus rendering them elastic to the point of accommodating any preexisting belief. But no matter what standards we apply, we should always be forthright and apply those standards consistently across different conspiracy theories.³⁸

The Diversity of Conspiracy Theories

Excluded from our definition of conspiracy theory are theories that

accuse groups of conspiring *for* the common good (e.g., scientists working secretly to cure cancer for the betterment of humanity), that do not involve harm (e.g., Elvis faked his death so he could hang out at truck stops undisturbed), and those occurring within fiction (e.g., the plot of a movie isn't really what it seems). Conspiracy theories vary in many ways, but what they have in common is a group working in secret for its own benefit and against the common good in a way that threatens bedrock ground rules and/or commits widespread fraud.³⁹ Next, we briefly explore some of this diversity.

The Conspirators

The conspirators in various theories range from the religious (e.g., Jews, the Catholic Church) to the anti-religious (atheists or Satanists), from Left (communists) to Right (conservatives), and from the well known (the *New York Times*) to the alternative (Russian-controlled fake news outlets). Any group can be accused of conspiring and, over time, most groups are accused of conspiring at some point or another. However, groups that are well known and powerful tend to attract more accusations than groups that are unknown and powerless—hence the focus of many conspiracy theories on politicians and other high-profile figures in the business community, entertainment industry, and the media. The powerless—migrant groups, immigrants, the poor—are rarely accused of orchestrating conspiracy theories themselves, even though they are often invoked as pawns in various conspiracy theories. Consider the white replacement conspiracy theory, which alleges that corporations and governments are attempting to replace white people with cheaper nonwhite labor. Such a conspiracy theory certainly invokes immigrants and minorities, but it is the powerful institutions—corporations and governments—that are masterminding the supposed plot.

The Number of Conspirators

Conspiracy theories are, at their core, about groups: more than one person (i.e., a group!) is conspiring, usually to hurt other groups (rather than individuals). The size of the group accused of conspiring can range from more than a million (e.g., the Freemasons) to a few dozen (e.g., the 2016 Trump campaign). Some conspiracy theories accuse a single person (e.g., George W. Bush

destroyed the Twin Towers) but imply that others were involved even if not explicitly named (Bush is not accused of going into the Twin Towers to set the explosives himself).

As we mentioned above, the more people involved in a conspiracy, the more likely it is to fail or to otherwise be exposed. Studies have examined the effect of group size on the viability of conspiracies, finding that, based on examinations of real conspiracies that have failed or been exposed, once the group is large enough to effectively pull off the conspiracy, “failure would be imminent even with the most generous estimates for the secret-keeping ability of active participants.”⁴⁰ Considering the global nature of many conspiracy theories, secrecy and cohesion would be hard to maintain. Climate change conspiracy theories, for example, posit that thousands of scientists, governmental bodies, and scientific organizations have been in cahoots for decades to fake climate data. Considering the size and scope of such an effort (among other evidence), climate change conspiracy theories are unlikely to be true.

When Do People Conspire?

Conspiracy theories often address historical events such as the 1941 bombing of Pearl Harbor, the 1963 assassination of President Kennedy, or the 1969 moon landing. Other conspiracy theories examine events that are more contemporary, such as the most recent election; still others feature plots that will occur sometime in the future (e.g., the New World Order is planning to enslave all of humanity within the next ten years). Some conspiracy theories don’t address specific temporal events as much as they regard continuing circumstances, such as income, racial, or gender inequality. Unlike conspiracies, *conspiracy theories* can take place in the past, present, or future—for an event, circumstance, or act to be considered a *conspiracy* (as in our definition above), it must have already been examined by epistemological authorities, meaning that it must have already taken place.

The Methods

The methods used by the supposed conspirators vary widely as well. Sometimes the methods are rather simple, but in other cases the schemes seem quite elaborate. Those accused of trying to subvert democracy are often said to be rigging ballot machines to commit

election fraud. In the 1950s, communists were accused of a plot to take over the United States by first dumbing down the population with fluoridated water so that it would be easier to control. More recently, some versions of the “chemtrail” conspiracy theory assert a conspiracy by powerful groups to harm people with dangerous chemicals; supposedly these chemicals are being sprayed into the air by jet planes. Conspiracy theories about the terror attacks of 9/11/2001 have suggested that the conspirators planted explosives in the Twin Towers and nearby Building 7, whereas other theories have suggested that the hijacked planes were holograms and never really existed.

The Goals

Conspiracy theories inherently assume that the conspirators wish to achieve something—that there is a prespecified end goal. This can range from making illicit profits to depopulating the planet. Sometimes the conspirators’ goals have been achieved or at least partially achieved. Those who believe that President Trump conspired with Russia to rig the 2016 election can point to the fact that Trump won the 2016 election and became president. Some believed after Trump’s election that he and Russia were engaged in an ongoing operation. But in other instances, the goals are never achieved. For example, those who believe that school shootings are false-flag attacks intended to curtail gun rights cannot point to (as of this writing) any meaningful attenuation of gun rights in the United States as a result of these attacks.

One reason why there are so many conspiracy theories available to explain so many events and circumstances is that there are no “official” versions of conspiracy theories. Whereas there is only one report of the 9/11 Commission, there are potentially an infinite number of variations of 9/11 conspiracy theories. In this way, conspiracy theories are similar to fan fiction: anyone can make up their own version. Given that most conspiracy theories attract so little attention and seem to die on the vine, there is no good way of understanding the total population of conspiracy theories (if such a concept even makes sense).

Conspiracy theories also attract varying amounts of attention. Thousands (if not millions!) of conspiracy theories have come and gone, but only a select few amass a large following, spark major investigations, or generate much interest from the media. The vast

majority of conspiracy theories will be concocted or shared with little notice, be discussed briefly at the office watercooler or family picnic or within the dark corners of social media, and then quietly disappear. For example, conspiracy theories suggesting that Barack Obama murdered Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia made headlines immediately after the justice's death in 2016 but have since been forgotten.⁴¹ Conspiracy theories holding that the COVID-19 pandemic was part of a plan to force people to be publicly anal swabbed or to eat bugs for their diet were mentioned briefly before disappearing into obscurity.⁴² It is important to note that usually the most contemporaneously relevant conspiracy theories attract our attention; but if we only focus on those, then we may have a biased view of the whole. Therefore, we should not think of conspiracy theories as generally spreading, attracting more believers, or “getting bigger” in terms of their popularity or salience. Instead, just as some conspiracy theories may be gaining traction at any given moment, others are losing relevance and being forgotten.⁴³

Conspiracy Theory Beliefs

Conspiracy theory beliefs (also called conspiracy beliefs) are beliefs that specific conspiracy theories are true or likely to be true. While beliefs are hard to measure directly, public opinion polls and examinations of public discourse both provide reasonable insight. Polls in the United States suggest that all Americans believe in at least one conspiracy theory and perhaps many. Consider that there are an infinite number of conspiracy theories for people to believe in, but most polls only ask respondents about a few conspiracy theories—and usually about only one version of those that are salient at a given point in time. As polls ask about more and more conspiracy theories, they tend to find fewer and fewer people who believe in no conspiracy theories at all. For example, a poll asking about beliefs in seven conspiracy theories showed that 55 percent of Americans believe in at least one of the seven they asked about.⁴⁴ Another poll asking about beliefs in twenty-two conspiracy theories found that about 90 percent of Americans believed at least one. If we were to ask about a hundred or a thousand conspiracy theories on a poll, it would likely show few if any nonbelievers across all of the conspiracy theories.

How we measure conspiracy theory beliefs is rather important. We need to consider that polling, while perhaps the best current method for measuring beliefs at the mass level, also has its shortcomings. Sometimes poll respondents jokingly say they believe in theories they do not really believe in.⁴⁵ Likewise, poll respondents may say they believe a theory because they want to express a more general belief. For example, some poll respondents said they believed that Hillary Clinton was a demon, but it might be the case that many of those respondents simply wanted to express an intense dislike of Clinton during a contentious election.⁴⁶ Just as there are forces that might lead people to say they agree with a conspiracy theory that they do not really believe, there are forces that may drive people to say they do not believe a conspiracy theory when they actually do.⁴⁷ For example, some people may hide their true beliefs because they perceive them to be socially unacceptable; if it were known that they held such beliefs, there would be a reputational cost to pay (e.g., others thinking the believer is “weird” and subsequently ignoring that person’s opinions). Given that there are opposing individual and social forces that impact how people answer survey questions—making the numbers of believers both artificially large and artificially small—it is likely the case that the numbers garnered on polls are close enough representations of conspiracy theory beliefs.⁴⁸ Nonetheless, poll results still leave significant room for interpretation and should always be deciphered with caution.

How a survey question is worded can affect whether the idea being asked about counts as a conspiracy theory or not. Consider a survey question asking respondents to express agreement with the claim “Vaccines cause autism” and another asking respondents to express agreement with the claim “Pharmaceutical companies and governments are actively working to hide the dangerous effects of vaccines from the public.” The latter expresses a conspiracy theory; the former expresses a belief that is often held by anti-vaxx conspiracy theorists but that is not necessarily a conspiracy theory in itself.⁴⁹ That vaccines cause any side effect is a claim about side effects (which may or may not be true), not a claim about the actions of shadowy conspirators working toward some goal.

Beyond the issue of question wording, what level of certainty qualifies as a conspiracy belief? Consider two versions of a survey question asking respondents about the chem trail conspiracy theory.

One version of this question asked respondents to “agree” or “disagree” with the theory; 5 percent agreed, 8 percent were not sure, and 87 percent disagreed.⁵⁰ A different version asked respondents if the chem trail conspiracy theory was “completely false,” “somewhat false,” “somewhat true,” “completely true,” or if they were “unsure.” Nine percent indicated they believed it was “completely true,” and 19 percent indicated they believed it was “somewhat true.”⁵¹ When the respondents who had indicated they were unsure were asked to make a “best guess,” 10 percent of the total sample indicated the theory was “completely true,” and 29 percent indicated it was “somewhat true.” The different ways of measuring belief led to estimates that vary by a factor of eight: 5 percent believe the chem trails conspiracy theory in the first version of the question, while up to 40 percent believe it is true in the second. It is not obvious which percentage is the “right” one.

Conspiracy Thinking

Some social scientists have focused less on beliefs in specific conspiracy theories and more on generalized *conspiracy thinking*.⁵² Sometimes referred to as conspiracist ideation, conspiracy mentality, or conspiratorial worldview (among other variations), conspiracy thinking is conceived of as a (mostly) stable, individual-level predisposition to perceive events and circumstances as the product of real-world conspiracies perpetrated by disfavored groups—that is, the tendency to see conspiracies everywhere. It could be thought of as an ideology or worldview in which the powerful actors that one does not like are constantly orchestrating conspiracies.⁵³

By focusing our attention on conspiracy thinking, we are less likely to get bogged down by the details of specific conspiracy theories (e.g., who the conspirators are, what the event was), which vary considerably across theories, and we can instead focus more deeply on the characteristics of individuals likely to believe in conspiracy theories. This focus is in line with traditional theories of public opinion, which highlight the importance of predispositions in the reception of information.⁵⁴

A *predisposition* is a tendency to hold a particular attitude or to act in a particular way. People tend to exhibit many different predispositions (e.g., ideology, racial prejudice, authoritarianism),

each of which colors how they view the world. Two people with different predispositions will likely come to very different conclusions about the exact same information. Partisanship is perhaps the predisposition that has garnered the most attention from political scientists (particularly in the United States). People who identify as Republicans or Democrats do not do so flippantly—those identifications are typically deeply entrenched, thereby serving to condition how partisans view the world. For example, Republicans and Democrats view the country's economic performance very differently depending on who is president: when a Republican occupies the Oval Office, Republicans in the mass public tend to believe the economy is in much better shape compared to what Democrats believe, irrespective of the truth of the matter; the opposite is true when a Democrat is president.⁵⁵ We will return to partisanship in later chapters, but the central takeaway here is that predispositions lead people to interpret events and circumstances in a particular way.

The research into conspiracy thinking has been ongoing since around 2007 (as of this writing), and social scientists have yet to discover why some people exhibit higher levels of conspiracy thinking than others do. What we do know for sure is that there is variability: some people exhibit high levels of conspiracy thinking, some low, and others middling. Researcher Michael Shermer suggests the causes could be evolutionary, reflective of an adaptive trait:

We make two types of errors: a type I error, or false positive, is believing a pattern is real when it is not; a type II error, or false negative, is not believing a pattern is real when it is. If you believe that the rustle in the grass is a dangerous predator when it is just the wind (a type I error), you are more likely to survive than if you believe that the rustle in the grass is just the wind when it is a dangerous predator (a type II error). Because the cost of making a type I error is less than the cost of making a type II error and because there is no time for careful deliberation between patternicities in the split-second world of predator-prey interactions, natural selection would have favored those animals most likely to assume that all patterns are real.

Those humans who assumed the worst were more likely to survive; those who assumed the rustle was just the wind were, over time, more likely to become food for predators and, therefore, less likely

to reproduce. While the evolutionary argument makes some sense (assuming you don't reject outright the theory of evolution as a conspiracy among biologists and Satanists!), direct evidence that conspiracy thinking stems from evolutionary causes has yet to be produced.⁵⁶

Along similar lines, some researchers have attempted to find links between conspiracy thinking and biological factors, such as prenatal hormone exposure. However, such research is in its early stages, and no evidence yet indicates a relationship.⁵⁷ Much the same, scholars have found evidence that psychological factors, such as delusional thinking styles, are associated with conspiracy thinking and *might* even (partially) cause conspiracy thinking.⁵⁸ Other scholars, however, argue that socialization—the culmination of the processes that introduce young people into society and nurture their worldviews—in addition to one's idiosyncratic experiences shape one's tendency (or lack thereof) toward conspiracy thinking. For example, a person who is exposed to conspiracy theories or is the victim of real conspiracies as a youth may be more likely to see the world through a conspiratorial lens later in life.⁵⁹ Because social scientists have yet to track the development of conspiracy thinking over long periods of time, it is currently impossible to know why some people exhibit higher levels of conspiracy thinking than others do.

Conspiracy thinking is usually measured in one of two ways. The first is to present survey respondents with a series of conspiracy theories and ask how many they believe in.⁶⁰ If the respondent believes in many, then the respondent seemingly possesses a high level of conspiracy thinking. The second way is to ask questions that do not touch upon specific conspiracy theories but rather tap into more general conspiratorial worldviews. For example, a question might ask respondents to agree or disagree with statements such as "Much of our lives are being controlled by plots hatched in secret places" or "Big events like wars, the recent recession, and the outcomes of elections are controlled by small groups of people who are working in secret against the rest of us."⁶¹ There is an advantage to this latter strategy in that it seeks to tap into conspiracy thinking more directly rather than through beliefs in specific conspiracy theories, which may be driven by factors other than just conspiracy thinking (e.g., partisanship).

Conspiracy Theorist

The *conspiracy theorist* label has many uses. Most generally, this term is used to indicate a person who believes in any conspiracy theory. Since everyone is likely to believe in at least one conspiracy theory, this usage of the conspiracy theory label is rendered useless—everyone is a conspiracy theorist! A more specific definition might refer to someone who believes in a specific conspiracy theory or theories, such as 9/11 conspiracy theorists or JFK assassination conspiracy theorists. Sometimes this term is used to refer to those who invent, expand upon, or investigate conspiracy theories. Still others use the label to refer to those who use conspiracy theories for personal or political gain. Alex Jones and David Icke, for example, created small empires for themselves and have turned handsome profits, all by concocting and sharing conspiracy theories. Politicians and activists have also advanced political goals using conspiracy theories: Donald Trump, Joe McCarthy, and Charles Coughlin immediately come to mind.

Like the term “conspiracy theory,” the term “conspiracy theorist” is often used by people wishing to discredit and denigrate others. This is because the term, in its most common colloquial usage, is used as a pejorative to indicate that someone is irrational, crazy, or insane.⁶² In this book, we limit the use of the term “conspiracy theorist,” using it only when its meaning is quite clear and never with pejorative intent.

The Post-Truth World?

Fake news, misinformation, and disinformation have become important topics, particularly since the 2016 US presidential election and Brexit referendum, when many journalists claimed that the United States (and the UK, for that matter) had entered a new “post-truth” era. For example:

It’s official: Truth is dead. Facts are passe. . . . Oxford Dictionaries has selected “post-truth” as 2016’s international word of the year, after the contentious “Brexit” referendum and an equally divisive U.S. presidential election caused usage of the adjective to skyrocket, according to the Oxford University Press. The dictionary defines “post-truth” as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than

appeals to emotion and personal belief.”⁶³

While the presence of false information in our politics should concern us, the discussion of this problem quickly became hyperbolic: “How did we come to a mass state of altered consciousness, as foreseen by George Orwell in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (though it took massive blasts of electricity to persuade Winston Smith he was seeing six fingers on O’Brien’s hand)? And how did we come to it so quickly?”⁶⁴ It is important to note that misinformation, disinformation, fake news, and conspiracy theories are hardly new concepts, even if our attention on them has become more focused in recent years. Also, people were influenced by emotions and group attachment (rather than facts) long before 2016.⁶⁵ None of this is new. The problem we really face is more perennial: people are not particularly adept at reasoning to the truth and often come to very different conclusions about it.

Misinformation is often used to refer to false information that is being communicated in some way, or to communicated information that would mislead someone into adopting a falsity. Information that is spread with the intent to deceive—what we might refer to as propaganda, for example—is *disinformation*.⁶⁶ Governments sometimes run covert campaigns to mislead people for some political purpose. For example, the US government documented efforts by the Russian government to spread disinformation in the months leading up to the 2016 presidential election. These efforts included “ambitious plans to stoke unrest and even violence inside the US as recently as 2018.”⁶⁷ Of course, the Russians were not the only or first country to engage in such activities. The difficulty with these terms is that it is often difficult to know if a piece of information is true or not, just by being exposed to it. Just the same, it is difficult to know if and how a piece of information would mislead someone or to know the intent behind the sharing of misinformation.

Fake news is perhaps best defined as “fabricated information that mimics news media content in form” but that is not created within the traditional norms for “ensuring the accuracy and credibility of information”—such as fact-checking and editorial gatekeeping—that are commonly associated with traditional journalistic outlets.⁶⁸ Fake news can provide misinformation and/or disinformation. It can be created and disseminated for partisan political purposes

(e.g., to influence voters), for financial gain (e.g., to attract clicks and advertising dollars), for global political purposes (e.g., to cause unrest in a competing country), or as a hoax (e.g., to trick people for the sake of doing so).

Fake outlets are countless and sometimes difficult to differentiate from legitimate news because fake news purveyors—to appear authoritative—emulate traditional news outlets in their appearance. This creates the potential for pieces of fake news to reach millions on social media platforms, where there is a general lack of gatekeeping and audiences are left to determine legitimacy for themselves. During the three months prior to the 2016 presidential election, the average American adult was exposed to at least one or more fake news story.⁶⁹ When people find fake news stories on social media, they are particularly likely to believe and share them if those stories comport with their preexisting beliefs, as is the case with conspiracy theories or other types of ideas and information.

It is important to point out that the term “fake news” is often applied to legitimate news sources by political actors. Former President Trump, for example, frequently refers to CNN and MSNBC as fake news, presumably to discredit unfavorable reporting. Traditional news sources make mistakes, occasionally spread misinformation, have multiple biases (beyond Left/Right ones, such as corporate bias and mainstream bias), and sometimes pass off opinion and punditry as journalism. Sometimes traditional news sources are blind to these deficiencies. Of course, this is not necessarily a good reason to abandon traditional news or turn to fake news. Traditional news outlets often utilize multiple layers of gatekeeping, editing, and fact-checking, they attempt to establish a reputation for credibility, and they pay a reputational cost for their mistakes; this is what separates them from less reliable sources, which are often less interested in accuracy than with generating audience size and engagement.

Anomalous Beliefs

Anomalous beliefs speak to the existence of paranormal, pseudoscientific, and supernatural phenomena. The term “conspiracy theory” is sometimes used to include a host of other anomalous ideas, such as the existence of Bigfoot or aliens. While

conspiracy theories can contain elements of pseudoscience, the paranormal, and the supernatural, it is important to keep the distinctions between such concepts clear. *Pseudoscience* is a collection of beliefs and practices thought to be based on or supported by the scientific method but that are not. Homeopathic cures, healing crystals, cupping, and dowsing rods (intended to locate underground water) are common examples. Forms of pseudoscience are likely to be encountered whether online, watching television, or in one's local pharmacy.

Pseudoscience and conspiracy theory refer to different, but overlapping, concepts. Both tend to rely on selectively chosen evidence to prove their validity while ignoring the evidence that disproves their contentions. Pseudoscientific concepts often appear in conspiracy theories, but they are not a necessary component. Just the same, conspiracy theories can be a part of pseudoscientific claims but are not necessary. For example, some pseudoscientific claims contend that positive proof of a particular claim is being hidden from the public by a conspiracy to hide the truth.

Cryptozoology is the pseudoscientific study of animals; the animals studied by cryptozoologists tend not to be verified as real by biologists. Bigfoot is perhaps the most prominent example in the United States; this mythical creature has spawned numerous cable television shows, including *Finding Bigfoot*, *Killing Bigfoot*, and *10 Million Dollar Bigfoot Bounty*. Despite the premises of these programs, none of them has revealed an actual Bigfoot or any tangible evidence thereof. Long-standing “investigative” groups, such as the Bigfoot Field Researchers Organization, have formed to track sightings and find specimens, but to no avail—no one has produced evidence of the existence of the creature, even though many people claim to have seen one.⁷⁰ An analysis of Bigfoot sightings found that they occur in places inhabited by bears, which suggests that eyewitnesses are likely to be mistaking bears for Bigfoots.⁷¹

The most famous visual account is the widely disputed Patterson film, shot in 1967 by Roger Patterson and Bob Gimlin. It shows an apish humanoid with dark fur walking through the Northern Californian woods for about a minute. However, attempts to authenticate the film have been unsuccessful.⁷² Outside the United States, myths speak of similar creatures, such as the Yeti, or Abominable Snowman, who supposedly occupies the Himalayan

region.⁷³

Other cryptozoological creatures include *Chupacabras*, small monsters that supposedly feast on goats. Sightings have occurred nearly worldwide but mostly in Mexico and Latin America.⁷⁴ The *Loch Ness Monster*, or Nessie, is said to live in Loch Ness, in the Scottish Highlands. Nessie has been a boon for Scottish tourism since its first publicized sightings in 1933. Since then, numerous photographs purporting to show a dragon or dinosaur-like creature have come to light. However, a BBC television program in 2003 documented a comprehensive search of the loch using sonar beams and satellite tracking; they failed to find any evidence of Nessie.⁷⁵

Bigfoots, Chupacabras, and lake monsters are not, on their own, conspiracy theories. The mere existence of undiscovered creatures does not meet our definition of conspiracy theory, as there is no expectation that these creatures are conspiring against anyone. However, if one posited that the government was covering up the existence of Bigfoot for some nefarious purpose, or that corporations were secretly breeding an army of Chupacabras to take over the world, such ideas would meet the definition of “conspiracy theory.”



Figure 2-2. Images like this have been used to suggest the existence of the Loch Ness Monster, or “Nessie.”
GettyImages

Paranormal phenomena are also often included in discussions of conspiracy theory, but they similarly do not meet the definition of conspiracy theory on their own. The paranormal is one “subset of pseudoscience” but what “sets the paranormal apart from other pseudosciences is a reliance on explanations for alleged phenomena that are well outside the bounds of established science,” such as extrasensory perception (ESP), telekinesis, ghosts, poltergeists, life after death, reincarnation, faith healing, human auras, and so forth.⁷⁶ This contrasts with pseudoscientific explanations for nonparanormal phenomena, which, while still unscientific, seek to explain observable phenomena (albeit poorly!).⁷⁷

Many people believe that they, or someone they know, possess *extra-sensory perception* (ESP). This is often described as the ability to see into the future, to view events taking place in other places, or to be able to communicate with others simply by sharing thoughts (without any observable communication technique).⁷⁸ Some people believe that their pets have these extraordinary abilities as well.⁷⁹ Despite a great many studies that purportedly show evidence of ESP, scientists are unable to replicate such findings. This likely indicates some combination of the presence of statistical outliers, inappropriate investigative methodologies and research designs, and researcher bias.⁸⁰

Telekinesis involves using one’s mind to move or otherwise affect physical objects. This was popularized in the 1970s, most famously by Uri Geller, a man who claimed the ability to melt and bend spoons with his mind.⁸¹ Geller also purported to have the ability to locate water and minerals underground and to repair broken watches and televisions with psychic powers. However, Geller’s abilities seem to be more easily explained by simple parlor tricks (e.g., bending the spoons in advance).⁸² Many others have since attempted to cash in on people’s fascination with these supposed powers. James Hydrick, for example, claimed the ability to flip telephone book pages and spin pencils without touching them.⁸³ However, when these powers were tested under conditions that would have ruled out the possibility that Hydrick was simply blowing on the pages and pencils, his powers disappeared. The

military applications of psychic powers (if they were to exist) have not escaped the American and Russian governments; both invested in programs intended to develop and deploy telekinesis as a form of statecraft. Despite the millions invested, neither government has ever been able to document success.⁸⁴

Ghosts are the essence of the deceased that (supposedly) can be detected by the living. Often tied to belief in ghosts are religious beliefs that offer believers eternal life for their souls after death. The first problem is that there is little scientific evidence that souls exist in the first place and no evidence that souls transfer a person's essence after death into some other realm, be it to heaven, hell, or anywhere else. Despite the numerous television shows that send camera crews into creepy buildings, there is no reason to expect that souls could affect the natural world, much less (as is often alleged on television shows) inhabit houses, insane asylums, and abandoned hospitals. Those who have tried to define or identify the soul have not been able to do so—just the very idea elicits questions that have yet to be answered.⁸⁵ For example, if one contracts Alzheimer's disease or amnesia, does one's soul retain their previous memories or personality? If so, how?

Life after death is, of course, an appealing concept, especially for those who fear death, wish to live forever, or cannot stomach the thought of separation from loved ones. People spend millions each year on attempts to contact deceased relatives through "channelers" such as John Edward and Theresa Caputo, the Long Island Medium. These individuals have yet to demonstrate their abilities under controlled scientific conditions. The "contacts" they make with the dead seem to be the product of seasoned guesswork (called "cold reading") or of previous research ("hot reading") rather than any link to the beyond.⁸⁶ Also frequent are claims of reincarnation (the dead being born again as someone else), faith healing (diseases being cured with supernatural powers), and out-of-body experiences (people leaving their body after a trauma but eventually returning), but none of these can be substantiated under controlled scientific conditions.⁸⁷

Many conspiracy theories have a supernatural element to them even though supernatural beliefs are not necessarily conspiratorial in nature. By *supernatural*, we mean having to do with non-natural forces, such as gods, angels, demons, fate, and karma. The Salem witch trials, for example, fused supernatural elements with

conspiracy theories by accusing women of conspiring with Satan.⁸⁸ But the supernatural has never been observed under controlled conditions and, therefore, cannot be substantiated: praying for patients receiving medical treatment seems to do more harm than good, if indeed it does anything at all; astrology (using celestial forces to predict human events) fails repeatedly under controlled conditions; reported near-death experiences have not yielded any evidence of supernatural realms.⁸⁹

Beliefs in aliens may qualify as supernatural, paranormal, and pseudoscientific, depending on how one conceptualizes the aliens. It would be pseudoscientific to believe that aliens have visited Earth and abducted countless people, given that no such accounts can be verified.⁹⁰ But one could have science on their side if one claimed that some form of life *probably* exists somewhere else in the universe. If one claimed that alien visits were being covered up by the government for some nefarious purpose, then one would be positing a conspiracy theory.

Conclusion

Defining terms is always important, but it is particularly important when discussing conspiracy theories because the terminology we use to label ideas denotes the level of legitimacy we are attaching to those ideas. Uses will vary, but in this book, “conspiracies” refer to groups of powerful individuals acting in secret, usually for their own benefit and against the common good; “conspiracy theory,” on the other hand, refers to an unauthoritative accusatory perception that a group of powerful individuals acted, are acting, or will act in secret, usually for their own benefit and against the common good. Conspiracy theories could be true but have yet to convince appropriate knowledge-generating bodies of experts.

The idea that conspiracy theory believers are believing the unbelievable is sometimes buttressed by the idea that one can tell that a conspiracy theory lacks merit, is unevicenced, or is crazy on its face. We might call this easily abused epistemological criterion the “I-know-it-when-I-see-it” standard. Unfortunately, it is not possible to tell, just by exposure to an idea, whether it is true or not. Instead, the “I-know-it-when-I-see-it” standard tends to result in the castigation of particular ideas based on one’s biased and subjective perceptions and other prior beliefs, identities, and

worldviews. People should believe a conspiracy theory—and label it a conspiracy—when that theory has been endorsed by the appropriate epistemological authorities. Conspiracy theories—when they reach a certain evidentiary threshold—should be investigated further. But until a conspiracy theory is deemed true or likely to be true by the appropriate epistemological authorities, it should be treated as suspect and properly labeled as a “conspiracy theory.”

Conspiracy theories are often associated with other unauthoritative accounts, such as paranormal and supernatural ideas. While conspiracy theories can include paranormal and other elements, ideas such as these are not necessarily conspiracy theories and should be treated separately. Conspiracy theories are associated with other such dubious ideas like misinformation, perhaps because these other categories of ideas, like conspiracy theories, are often outside of the mainstream and challenge authoritative accounts.

Discussion Questions

1. When should a conspiracy theory be investigated? When should a conspiracy theory be believed?
2. What conspiracy theories do you believe in, and why? What's your evidence?
3. What supernatural, paranormal, and cryptozoological ideas do you believe in, and why?

Key Terms and Concepts

Anomalous Beliefs

Bigfoot

Chupacabras

Cock-Up Theory

Conspiracy

Conspiracy Belief

Conspiracy Theorist

Conspiracy Theory

Conspiracy Thinking

Cryptozoology

Epistemic Authority

Epistemology

Extrasensory perception (ESP)

Fake News
Falsifiability
Ghosts
Misinformation
Paranormal
Post-Truth World
Predisposition
Pseudoscience
Psychopathology
Supernatural
Telekinesis
Watergate

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3

The Popularity of Conspiracy and Anomalous Beliefs

Do you believe that President John F. Kennedy was killed by a conspiracy rather than by a lone gunman? If you answered yes, who do you believe orchestrated the conspiracy: the Soviet Union, Fidel Castro, the Mafia, the CIA, or perhaps someone else? Do you believe the moon landing was faked? If so, who do you think orchestrated it, and for what reasons? Do you believe that genetically modified foods are unsafe and the dangers of eating such foods are actively being hidden from us? Or do you believe that 5G technology causes serious health issues but that those dangers are being covered up?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, then in the most general sense, you are a conspiracy theorist. No need to panic, though—you are not alone. This chapter uses recent US and international polling data to show just how prevalent conspiracy beliefs are. In addition to examining the prevalence of conspiracy theory beliefs, we describe the prevalence of other anomalous beliefs, or beliefs that speak to the existence of paranormal,

pseudoscientific, and supernatural phenomenon.

Measurement

Most of the research measuring conspiracy and other anomalous beliefs uses surveys to poll the public. This involves researchers picking topics to investigate, writing questions to ask, and then distributing the survey to a sample of people. Obviously, if researchers wanted to poll the United States, they could not reach all 330 million people. Instead, they must rely on smaller, more manageable samples of people (usually between 500 and 2,000). To be sure that the individuals in the sample are representative of the broader population, researchers attempt to ensure that their samples look like the broader population in terms of age, level of education, gender, race, ethnicity, and income. Principles of statistical inference show that random (or “probabilistic”) but representative sampling of this sort can be used to make accurate judgments about the beliefs of the broader population.

To understand public opinion, it is best to gather multiple surveys over time and ask about the same topic in both similar and different ways. This allows researchers to decipher which opinions are stable and which change, since all survey results are partly due to both “true” public opinion (the concept being measured) and the method of measurement (e.g., the way the survey question was written). Here are a few important considerations to have in mind when looking at polls of conspiracy theory beliefs:

When was the survey taken? At the mass level, conspiracy theory beliefs are likely to wax and wane over time and in relation to contemporaneous events. Asking about 9/11 conspiracy theories, for example, might give different results depending on whether the poll was asked the week after, the year after, or two decades after the attack. Particularly with conspiracy theories that address specific events or circumstances, we need to be cognizant of the time that has passed. It could be the case that as conspiracy theories and the events they address fade into history, the conspiracy theories lose both relevance and believers. On the other hand, many conspiracy theories—like those surrounding the assassination of JFK—remain majority beliefs for decades but take on different cultural meaning as time goes on.¹

What is the instrument? By this, we mean what is the survey

question, how is it asked, and what are the answers that a respondent may provide? Changing the wording of a survey question or changing the response options available for respondents to choose from will usually change the results, sometimes radically.² Further, the results from different polls that use different methods to tap beliefs may not be directly comparable.

We also need to consider whether the survey question is probing a conspiracy theory belief or not. For example, asking respondents if they agree that “the findings of the 9/11 Commission are entirely correct,” will likely elicit negative responses from 9/11 conspiracy theorists, but it will also garner negative responses from people who believe that the 9/11 Commission made a few inadvertent errors or omissions. If we were more concerned with tapping conspiracy theory beliefs specifically, it would be better to ask if respondents agree that “the findings of the 9/11 Commission are part of an intentional cover-up.”

How should we interpret the answer set? Most survey questions about conspiracy beliefs ask survey takers to respond on a graded scale of (dis)agreement (e.g., “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”), or to register simple belief or disbelief, perhaps using “yes” or “no” or “true” or “false” options. How should we interpret responses on a graded (dis)agreement scale? Are the conspiracy theory believers just the ones who respond “strongly agree”? Or should we consider a respondent who responds either “strongly agree” or “somewhat agree” to be a believer? (There is no right answer that applies across all situations, but usually those who “strongly agree” and “somewhat agree” are combined together). These questions also showcase problems associated with comparing polls that utilize different questions and response options. If forced to choose between a conspiracy being “true” or “false,” one might opt to state that it is “true” just to be on the safe side; if, however, one were given the option to select “neither agree nor disagree” or only “somewhat agree,” one might utilize those options to express some degree of uncertainty.

What events and conditions might affect the results? The circumstances surrounding polls may impact the results. Asking if an election was tainted by fraud shortly after the results of the election are known will likely lead some respondents—particularly those on the losing side—to answer affirmatively.³ But, had the election turned out differently, then the electoral losers would be

different people, and it would be *those losers* who would be most likely to believe in fraud. For example, after Democrats win an election, it is usually the Republicans who cry foul and assert that the outcome was due to fraud, but when Republicans win, it is the Democrats who assert fraud.⁴

During times when conspiracies and conspiracy theories are salient in political discourse, people may be more likely to report belief in conspiracy theories. For example, when Americans were asked about a conspiracy theory involving the faking of unemployment statistics by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), about 30 percent expressed belief.⁵ A few months later, in spring 2013, several scandals became prominent in the news, each potentially indicating a conspiracy on behalf of the Obama administration. The researchers asked the same question again and found that belief in the BLS conspiracy theory rose about twenty percentage points. They attributed this sharp increase in reported belief to the priming effect of news: news surrounding other scandals *primed* respondents to be more receptive to this particular conspiracy theory.⁶

Priming of this sort can even prompt people to report belief in ideas that they never thought very deeply about. For example, when researchers fabricated a conspiracy theory that “the U.S. government is mandating the switch to compact fluorescent light bulbs because such lights make people more obedient and easier to control,” almost 20 percent claimed to have heard it before (which is fascinating in itself), and 11 percent responded that they agreed with it.⁷

Despite its problems, polling is perhaps the best tool for measuring conspiracy theory beliefs at the mass level. Still, it is important that we take individual polls with a grain of salt, understand that there are likely multiple reasons for any particular outcome, and track different measures of a conspiracy theory belief over time.⁸ The following sections detail the poll numbers for various conspiracy theories; we begin with conspiracy theories addressing both the Kennedy assassination and immigration. We then examine US poll numbers tapping beliefs in a selection of conspiracy theories within the following five categories: government malfeasance, extraterrestrial cover-up, malevolent global conspiracies, personal well-being, and control of information.⁹ We then move on to the poll numbers surrounding

other, anomalistic beliefs.

Conspiracy Theories and Poll Numbers

Perhaps the most consistently popular conspiracy theories in the United States are Kennedy assassination theories. Even though the Warren Commission determined that President Kennedy was killed by a single gunman, Lee Harvey Oswald, more than 50 percent of Americans have believed a conspiracy theory involving more than one actor for almost sixty years.¹⁰ In some US polls, belief in conspiracy theories regarding the assassination reached nearly 80 percent.¹¹ These beliefs are similar elsewhere as well: a 2017 poll showed that more than 50 percent of the French public believed one version of the Kennedy conspiracy theory!¹²

There are many potential reasons for such high polling numbers. The first has to do with how pollsters ask about JFK assassination conspiracy theories. Most pollsters ask respondents if they believe a conspiracy or cover-up took place; thus, anyone who believes *any* conspiracy theory about the assassination can answer affirmatively. When pollsters follow up by asking about who conspired to kill Kennedy, the opinions then divide. Some people believe that the Soviet Union, Fidel Castro, or the Mafia were involved, and many others aren't sure.¹³ The large menu of potential conspirators ensures that there is some version of the conspiracy theory for everyone potentially inclined to believe a conspiracy was afoot. Second, JFK assassination theories are ubiquitous in popular culture, both in America and abroad. Hundreds of movies, television shows, and books have been produced attempting to expose the true conspiracy; these collectively boost the salience of JFK assassination theories even though the event occurred more than a half century ago.¹⁴ Their salience further fosters a culture that reproduces these beliefs. Because so many people believe in Kennedy conspiracy theories, young citizens are invariably exposed to them during their formative years, which allows the theories to take root even for people born decades after the fact.¹⁵

Immigration Conspiracy Theories

Immigration attracts many conspiracy theories (many of which are tied to xenophobia, racism, or innate concerns over *the other*).¹⁶ A

2018 poll of Americans showed that 55 percent believe the government is concealing the true cost of immigration to taxpayers and society, 41 percent perceive that a conspiracy of silence punishes those who speak out in opposition to immigration, and 40 percent agree with the statement, “In the last 20 years, the US Government has deliberately tried to make American society more ethnically diverse through its immigration policy.”¹⁷ There is a strong view among Americans that immigration and diversity are costly and intentionally forced projects.

Conspiracy theories about immigration are prevalent outside of the United States as well. When asked the same questions in 2018, 58 percent of Britons believed that their government was concealing the true cost of immigration, 59 percent perceived that a conspiracy of silence punished those who spoke out in opposition to immigration, and 51 percent believed that the British government deliberately tried to make British society more ethnically diverse.¹⁸ When asked in 2016 if they agreed with the statement “The Government is deliberately hiding the truth about how many immigrants really live in this country,” 42 percent of Germans, 41 percent of Britons, 31 percent of Swedes, 29 percent of Italians, 20 percent of Poles, 20 percent of Argentinians, and 16 percent of Portuguese agreed. Belief in this theory might seem low in Poland, a state that at that time had banned many forms of immigration, but because of the bans, there was little reason for Poles to believe that their government had much to hide.¹⁹

One conspiracy theory that has taken hold across parts of Europe and the United States is the white replacement theory; in it, both governments and corporations are replacing white people with cheaper laborers. This theory has motivated several mass shooters in both the United States and elsewhere. In 2017, this theory was endorsed by nearly half of French respondents.²⁰ In 2022, 32 percent of Americans believed the statement “In the last 20 years, the government has deliberately discriminated against white Americans with its Immigration policies,” and an equal number believed “Powerful politicians and corporate leaders are trying to replace white people in the U.S. with cheaper foreign laborers.”²¹

It is important to note that the villains in most immigration conspiracy theories are often powerful elites (who are encouraging, allowing, or orchestrating the migration) rather than the immigrants themselves, who are largely pawns in the supposed

schemes. Interestingly, powerful elites who oppose immigration also use vulnerable immigrants as pawns, sometimes shipping immigrants across the country to score cheap political points.²² Immigration and immigrants seem to be an evergreen target for conspiracy theories.

Government Malfeasance

Governments are powerful institutions. For that reason, they tend to attract numerous accusations of conspiracy—from those involving cover-ups to extrajudicial killings. [Table 3.1](#) shows several of these conspiracy theories and their estimated popularity, according to a national survey from May 2021. Upwards of 20 percent of Americans believe the government assassinated popular entertainers, like John Lennon of the Beatles. A similar proportion of Americans believe that major foreign policy actions—from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan all the way back to World War II—are based on the conspiratorial machinations of war-mongering politicians.

Sometimes perceived conspiratorial malfeasance can be quite extreme. For example, 15 percent of Americans believe that “media or the government adds secret mind-controlling technology to television broadcast signals,” and another 15 percent are unsure.²³ An equal proportion of Floridians in 2018 believed that the government controlled major weather events, like hurricanes.²⁴

Table 3.1. Percentage of Americans Believing Government Malfeasance Conspiracy Theories

	Question Wording	Percent Believe
1.	Do you think the US government has engaged in the assassination of entertainers who have tried to spread a counterculture message it didn't like, such as John Lennon, Kurt Cobain, Tupac Shakur, and others, or not?*	20
2.	Certain US government officials planned the attacks of September 11, 2001, because they wanted the	19

3.	United States to go to war in the Middle East. Some people have argued that President Franklin D. Roosevelt knew about Japanese plans to bomb Pearl Harbor but did nothing about it because he wanted an excuse to involve the US (United States) on the side of the Allies in the war.*	18
4.	The US government is mandating the switch to compact fluorescent light bulbs because such lights make people more obedient and easier to control.	12
5.	Do you think that the Reagan campaign made a deal with the Iranians to hold the American hostages in Iran until after the 1980 presidential election, or not?	12
6.	Do you think there was a police conspiracy to frame O. J. Simpson, or not?*	10

Note: Where response options are not dichotomous (e.g., yes/no, believe/don't believe), the proportion expressing belief is those who "agree" or "strongly agree" with a sentiment.

*dichotomous response

Conspiracy theories about government malfeasance also appear to transcend geographic and cultural boundaries. When asked in 2016 if they could trust government ministers in their country to tell the truth, more than 80 percent of Argentinians, Italians, Poles, and Portuguese; 70 percent of Germans and Britons; and 60 percent of Swedes answered "not much" or "not at all."²⁵ Similar numbers from these countries believed that senior leaders of the European Union or the United States could not be trusted to tell the truth either.²⁶ Moreover, many people worldwide are unsure whether the democracy they live in is real; when responding to the statement "Even though we live in what's called a democracy, a few people will always run things in this country anyway," 70 percent of

Portuguese and Argentinians, 60 percent of Italians, 50 percent of Germans, Britons, and Poles, and 33 percent of Swedes answered affirmatively.

Extraterrestrial Cover-Up

Since around the time of World War II, Americans have had a fascination with aliens and alien visitors. This was perhaps due to the onset of the Cold War, America's place as a superpower, and fears of the communist menace. As the decades wore on, the tales became more elaborate, outlandish, and conspiratorial. For example, the crashing of a weather balloon in Roswell, New Mexico, in 1947 sparked questions about an alien visitation. While the military has maintained that nothing otherworldly was discovered in the desert, the conspiracy theories, over time, began to claim that the military recovered alien bodies, space technology, and advanced weaponry.²⁷

When asked in 2013 if they believed or did not believe that “a UFO crashed at Roswell, New Mexico in 1947, and the US government covered it up,” 21 percent of Americans responded affirmatively and 32 percent were not sure.²⁸ Beliefs in alien-government cover-ups tend to be stable across polls, but some polls in the late 1990s showed a spike in belief. For example, a 1997 poll commissioned by CNN found that

while nearly three-quarters of the 1,024 adults questioned for the poll said they had never seen or known anyone who saw a UFO, 54 percent believe intelligent life exists outside Earth. Sixty-four percent of the respondents said that aliens have contacted humans, half said they've abducted humans, and 37 percent said they have contacted the U.S. government.

Those are unusually high numbers and could represent polling error or a fascination with aliens possibly driven by the contemporaneously popular television show *The X-Files*. When the survey questions are more general, they elicit higher levels of agreement. For example, when asked if any form of life exists anywhere in the universe, belief stands around 60 percent of Americans. If asked a more specific question—for example, whether beings like us exist elsewhere in the universe—only about 40 percent of Americans agree.²⁹ Very small, though not negligible,

numbers of people claim to have been abducted or know someone who has.³⁰



Figure 3-1. Reptilian humanoid, similar to those theorized by believers in the reptilian elite conspiracy theory.
GettyImages

The *reptilian elite conspiracy theory* goes further than accusing the government of hiding alien contact; it asserts that interdimensional shape-shifting lizards secretly rule the planet. This theory, pioneered by the UK's David Icke, attracts large audiences to sold-out arenas across the world, but the attraction seems less wide than deep.³¹ Despite being named by *Time* magazine as one of the “most enduring” conspiracy theories of all time, the one known poll of belief in this theory shows that only 4 percent of Americans agree with it.³²

Conspiracy beliefs about UFOs and aliens are hardly confined to the United States. When asked whether they believed that extraterrestrials had visited Earth sometime in the past, 21 percent of Canadians and 19 percent of Britons answered yes.³³ In an expansive poll of six European countries and Argentina in 2016, respondents were asked to agree or disagree with the statement “Humans have made contact with aliens and this fact has been deliberately hidden from the public.” Agreeing were 25 percent of Argentinians, 11 percent of both Portuguese and Italians, 9 percent

of Britons, 8 percent of Poles, and 6 percent of both Swedes and Germans.³⁴

Malevolent Global Conspiracies

Many conspiracy theories go beyond domestic actors, implicating supposed conspirators in plots of global domination. When Americans were asked whether they believed “a secretive power elite with a globalist agenda is conspiring to eventually rule the world through an authoritarian world government, or New World Order,” or not, 28 percent answered affirmatively and an equal number were unsure.³⁵ Table 3.2 showcases beliefs in additional theories. For example, 18 percent of Americans believe that global warming is a hoax—one presumably perpetrated not only by US officials and scientists but by experts and officials the world over. Around 26 percent of Americans believe that George Soros is behind a plot to destabilize America and subsequently control the world and that the Rothschilds control world economies through their wealth and banking connections. Incidentally, both conspiracy theories are often anti-Semitic, as both Soros and the Rothschilds are Jewish. Jews are one of several different groups that tend to invoke the ire of conspiracy theorists—we unpack the sociological roots of conspiracy theories in chapter 4.

Table 3.2. Percentage of Americans Believing Malevolent Global Conspiracy Theories

	Question Wording	Percent Believe
1.	Billionaire George Soros is behind a hidden plot to destabilize the American government, take control of the media, and put the world under his control.	26
2.	A powerful family, the Rothschilds, through their wealth, controls governments, wars, and many countries' economies.	26
3.	Do you believe global warming is a hoax, or not?*	18

Note: Where response options are not dichotomous (e.g., yes/no,

believe/don't believe), the proportion expressing belief is those who "agree" or "strongly agree" with a sentiment. Data from Qualtrics survey May 2021.

*dichotomous response

Personal Well-Being

Health and well-being are often the concern of conspiracy theories, many of which address medicine, the pharmaceutical industry and other health-related institutions, and vaccines. Many health-related conspiracy theories involve science more generally, frequently suggesting that scientific findings have been faked by scientists, controlled by unscrupulous organizations, are part of a political scam, or some combination thereof. Such conspiracy theories, by denigrating science, thwart progress and endanger lives. For example, conspiracy theories involving genetically modified crops have been popular for decades, motivating activists to call for government to adopt strict labeling and other restrictions on genetically modified products.

Table 3.3. Percentage of Americans Believing Personal Well-Being Conspiracy Theories

	Question Wording	Percent Believe
1.	The dangers of genetically modified foods are being hidden from the public.	40
2.	The Food and Drug Administration is deliberately preventing the public from getting natural cures for cancer and other diseases because of pressure from drug companies.	35
3.	Do you believe that the pharmaceutical industry is in league with the medical industry to "invent" new diseases in order to make money, or not?*	20
4.	Health officials know that cell phones cause cancer but	20

	are doing nothing to stop it, because large corporations won't let them.	
5.	Do you completely agree, mostly agree, mostly disagree, or completely disagree that AIDS is a form of systematic destruction of minorities like Blacks and Hispanics?	15
6.	Do you believe the government adds fluoride to our water supply, not for dental health reasons but for other, more sinister reasons, or not?*	13
7.	5G cell phone technology is responsible for the spread of the coronavirus.	7

Note: Where response options are not dichotomous (e.g., yes/no, believe/don't believe), the proportion expressing belief is those who "agree" or "strongly agree" with a sentiment.

*dichotomous response

Table 3.3 contains information about the popularity of beliefs in several conspiracy theories like this. For example, 40 percent of Americans believe that the dangers of genetically modified food are being hidden from the public, and 35 percent believe the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) colludes with drug companies to impede the quest for cures for cancer and other diseases. Compared to these beliefs, fairly few Americans believe that 5G cellular technology was responsible for the spread of COVID-19, though this did not preclude some of the most strident believers from setting fire to 5G towers or attacking technicians in Europe.³⁶

Conspiracy theories have long motivated activists to oppose the regulation of fluoride in drinking water.³⁷ In response, some local governments have removed or refused to add fluoride into their water supplies. Teeth have paid a price for these policies: cities that cease fluoridation experience a measurable increase of tooth decay.³⁸ Fluoridation of the public water supply is supported by the vast majority of the medical community and even by dentists who would likely gain financially from a lack of fluoride in the water supply. Indeed, the Calgary City Council (in Canada) voted to

remove fluoride from its local drinking water in 2011; a few years later, tooth decay in children increased significantly in comparison to nearby Edmonton, a city that continued to fluoridate.³⁹ Despite the evidence of its safety and benefits, fluoride has long been a thorny issue, owing largely to conspiracy theories.

In the 1950s, fluoride conspiracy theories centered primarily on alleged government plots to use fluoridation to institute communism and were endorsed largely by conservatives. However, this has changed in recent decades. In Portland, Oregon, for example, left-wing conspiracy theories became fuel for an intense political battle after the city council voted to begin fluoridating. The opposition came from leftists and included high-profile supporters such as Ralph Nader, the NAACP, and the Sierra Club. Portland eventually voted to overturn the city council's decision.⁴⁰

In 2013, only about 10 percent of Americans believed the government fluoridated the water supply “not for dental health reasons, but for other, more sinister reasons.”⁴¹ While beliefs in fluoride conspiracy theories are not widely held today, they can become potent during the local policy-making process. Going back to an account from the 1950s, scientists and experts were often powerless at the hands of conspiracy theories:

It would appear the backers of this new aid to dental health made the classic military error of underestimating the enemy. . . . They relied too heavily on the presumed confidence of voters in the AMA, ADA, U.S. Public Health Service, and state and local health authorities who have given fluoridation their blessing. . . . [But] after [fluoride opponents] fire their counterbarrage of speeches, leaflets, mailing pieces and newspaper ads, the poor voter is baffled and uncertain. The strategy of fluoridation's foes is to . . . create doubts in the voters' minds. Once this is accomplished, they know people are likely to vote to maintain the status quo.⁴²

Anti-fluoridation attitudes are also evident across the globe. In a study of focus groups across sixteen European countries, researchers found that most of the participants were against water fluoridation, although groups in Greece, Ireland, Poland, and Sweden were more in favor.⁴³

Finally, there is a long history of HIV/AIDS-related conspiracy theories. When first identified in the 1980s, HIV and AIDS were widely misunderstood. Unfortunately, these diseases—despite the

great advancements scientists have made in understanding and combating them—continue to spark misinformation and misunderstanding. As a particularly jarring example, many Americans either strongly believe or question whether the CIA deliberately infected African Americans with HIV.⁴⁴

In Africa the fear of AIDS has been eclipsed by the fear of medicines for preventing AIDS.⁴⁵ The former health minister of South Africa, Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, claimed that the country's AIDS crisis was caused by “a global conspiracy intent on reducing the continent's population.”⁴⁶ He suggested that those infected with HIV cure it via massage and vitamins because, he contended, the pharmaceuticals were part of a Western plot. As many as three hundred thousand people died prematurely because of ideas such as these.⁴⁷ Across other parts of the globe, similar theories attract varying levels of acceptance: 25 percent of Argentinians believe that “the AIDS virus was created and spread around the world on purpose by a secret group or organization.”⁴⁸ Similarly, 30 percent of the French believed that “AIDS was created in a laboratory and tested on Africans” in 2017.⁴⁹ These beliefs have been tied to unsafe sexual practices, further compounding the societal toll conspiracy theories such as these inflict.⁵⁰

Control of Information

While many conspiracy theories discussed so far focus on the actions of particular conspirators, many are concerned with quality—especially the veracity (i.e., truth versus falsity)—of information. For example, conspiracy theories about the control or quality of information might involve a cover-up, whereby valuable information is hidden from public view, or might argue that the supposed conspirators are deliberately spreading false information to manipulate people's beliefs or behaviors.

Diseases once thought to be eradicated have experienced a resurgence because of conspiracy theories asserting that the measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR) and other vaccines are unsafe and that the potentially deadly effects are being covered up.⁵¹ There is no shortage of credulous celebrities and politicians who have jumped on this bandwagon, thereby extending the reach of anti-vaxx conspiracy theories.⁵² Despite the success of the HPV vaccine at preventing certain types of cancers, unfounded conspiracy

theories have driven parents to eschew the vaccine for their daughters.⁵³ Politicians have waded into the debate about this vaccine as well: Michelle Bachmann, a former Republican congresswoman and presidential candidate, falsely claimed in a nationally televised debate that HPV vaccination policy was part of a conspiracy and that the vaccine made people “retarded.”⁵⁴

By some metrics, these conspiracy theories have even outpaced scientific information about the virus.⁵⁵ About 20 percent of Americans agree that “there is a link between childhood vaccines and autism,” and 35 percent are unsure.⁵⁶ While these proportions fall short of a majority, they are sufficiently large to prevent society from achieving herd immunity should the believers opt not to vaccinate. Other examples of conspiracy theories that involve the control or quality of information are displayed in [Table 3.4](#). Around 50 percent of Americans believe that the government has deliberately concealed information about UFOs and aliens, and 16 percent believe that the truth about the tragic Sandy Hook Elementary shooting was deliberately concealed in order to advance a political agenda.

Table 3.4. Percentage of Americans Believing Control-of-Information Conspiracy Theories

	Question Wording	Percent Believe
1.	Do you think the government is keeping information from the public that shows UFOs (Unidentified Flying Objects) are real or that aliens have visited Earth?*	50
2.	The dangers of vaccines are being hidden by the medical establishment.	29
3.	Some people are hiding the truth about the December 14, 2012, school shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary in order to advance a political agenda.	16
4.	Thinking about space exploration, do you think the government staged and faked the Apollo moon	10

landings, or don't you feel
that way?*

5.

Do you believe that Osama
bin Laden is dead, or do you
think he is still alive?*

5

Note: Where response options are not dichotomous (e.g., yes/no, believe/don't believe), the proportion expressing belief is those who "agree" or "strongly agree" with a sentiment (May 2021).

*dichotomous response

Climate change conspiracy theories are a particularly prominent class of theories that tend to be centered on the manipulation of information. While the veracity of climate change is widely accepted across Europe, many Americans have rejected the science, instead looking to conspiracy theories to explain away the findings of thousands of independent scientists. Indeed, as many as 18 percent of Americans believe climate change is a hoax of some sort.⁵⁷ Climate skepticism has been palpable in Australia as well, where 21 percent of people believe that "global warming is a hoax perpetrated by scientists."⁵⁸ This mass skepticism has hindered the progress of legislation designed to slow the progress of climate change.

The 1969 moon landing was one of the greatest achievements of human civilization. Despite that it would be nearly impossible to fake, between 5 percent and 20 percent of Americans consistently believe it was a hoax.⁵⁹ Even 16 percent of the French agree that the US moon landing was faked!⁶⁰ This conspiracy theory, like those regarding the assassination of JFK, showcase the resilience of some conspiracy theories over multiple generations, technological advancements, and cultural changes.

Anomalistic Beliefs

Moving away from conspiracy beliefs, many anomalistic beliefs are quite popular as well. Many have predicted when the world will come to an end, but the prophesied dates always come and go without Armageddon. In 2011, 27 percent of Americans agreed with the statement "We are currently living in End Times as foretold by Biblical prophecy."⁶¹ Undergirding this, two-thirds of Americans believe in angels, and 57 percent believe in Satan.⁶² In

2016, a far smaller number—about 20 percent—of Britons believed in angels, and about 15 percent believed in the devil.⁶³

The supernatural often bleeds into partisan politics. Thirteen percent of Americans in 2013 believed that President Obama was the Antichrist; a 2016 poll of North Carolinians showed that 20 percent believed that Hillary Clinton was the devil.⁶⁴ In 2017, 36 percent of Americans believed that President Trump was “scarier” than the devil.⁶⁵

In 2017, about 52 percent of Americans believed that “places can be haunted by spirits.”⁶⁶ Thirteen percent in 2008 believed that there was “currently a ghost or spirit living” in their own home.⁶⁷ Fifty-seven percent of Americans believed in the existence of ghosts in 2008, compared to just 30 percent of Britons in 2016.⁶⁸ In 2008, 35 percent of Americans reported to have personally experienced the presence of a ghost.⁶⁹ About 30 percent of Britons believed in an “afterlife” in 2016, and 20 percent believed in an “everlasting soul.”⁷⁰ A fifth of Americans in 2017 believed that certain individuals could make contact with the dead, and an equal number of Brits in 2016 believed in past lives or reincarnation.⁷¹

In 2005, 40 percent of Americans believed in extrasensory perception (ESP); 31 percent believed in “telepathy/communication between minds without using traditional senses,” and 26 percent in “clairvoyance/the power of the mind to know the past and predict the future.”⁷² About 20 percent of Americans in 2017 believed that “fortune tellers and psychics can foresee the future,” and 25 percent believed that people can move objects with their minds.⁷³

In 2005, a quarter of Americans believed in astrology—that the positions of the planets and the stars can affect people’s lives.⁷⁴ In 2017, just under 10 percent of Americans believed that tarot cards and palm reading could accurately predict the future, but only 47 percent agreed that most people “who advertise as psychics or mediums are fakes.”⁷⁵ About 21 percent of Americans in 2005 believed in witches; 30 percent in 2018 believed that people could put “curses” on other people.⁷⁶ Large numbers of people believe in these phenomenon, but reliable, supporting evidence has never been produced.⁷⁷

Despite the number of cable television shows searching for him, only 16 percent of Americans in 2017 believed that Bigfoot is real, but an astonishing 55 percent believed that “ancient, advanced civilizations, such as Atlantis, once existed.”⁷⁸ *Urban legends*, such as

these, constitute a form of modern folklore that is presented as true but is unsupported by evidence (e.g., the idea that eating watermelon seeds will grow a watermelon in your stomach). Since the mid-1960s, an urban legend has claimed that Paul McCartney, one of the Beatles, died in a car crash and was replaced with a doppelganger. Less than 10 percent of Americans believe this, but it remains well known and is often referred to as a conspiracy theory (even though it isn't one, according to our definition).⁷⁹



Figure 3-2. Fortune teller. Many people believe that some “psychics” can see the future.
GettyImages

Conclusion

Public opinion polls are perhaps the best way to measure the societal prevalence of conspiracy theory and anomalous beliefs because they speak to the public's beliefs as a whole and avoid anecdotal accounts. Sometimes it feels as though some conspiracy theories are believed widely due to their salience, but polls can help us quantify the number of believers. For example, *Time* magazine included the moon landing and lizard people theories in a list of their “Top Ten” conspiracy theories of all time, but polls show that neither of these theories are among the conspiracy theories most

believed by Americans.⁸⁰ In this way, polls are better than anecdotes at telling us about the number of people who believe a particular idea.

On the other hand, polling results need to be contextualized before drawing conclusions. First, poll results may be impacted by the social, political, or economic environment in which they are taken. Prominent, ongoing scandals may lead people to be more likely to express belief in conspiracy theories on polls. Likewise, political circumstances, such as who is in power, could impact which poll respondents are most likely to express belief in conspiracy theories. Second, because respondents can only respond to questions they are asked about, the choices made by researchers regarding which conspiracy theories to study are quite consequential and may promote inferential biases. Third, how questions about conspiracy theories are worded can affect how many people express belief. In general, when a survey question asks about a very specific conspiracy theory (e.g., Did Castro conspire to kill President Kennedy?), fewer respondents are likely to express belief in it than when the question poses a more general theory (e.g., Was Kennedy the victim of a conspiracy?). Fourth, because surveys ask questions that pollsters are interested in, questionnaires may ask about concepts that respondents have never thought about deeply. Because of this, some survey questions may elicit nonresponses—a failure to register a belief (e.g., not providing an answer, answering “don’t know”)—or non-attitudes—flippant responses to ideas that the respondents have thought little about. In other instances, respondents are often willing to express a belief in a conspiracy theory that the researchers fabricated.⁸¹ Fifth, people sometimes joke around on surveys or want to prove a larger point about a political adversary by agreeing with a conspiracy theory they don’t really believe in—this can be a mechanism by which people can register sharp disapproval of an idea, person, or group. Finally, polling is expensive; it is prohibitive to poll people often or to do so everywhere. This is why most polls of conspiracy beliefs are administered in open societies. Analyzing text (e.g., letters to the editor, tweets, comments on news articles) may address some of these problems, but because writers are not representative of the population as a whole, the results of any such analyses may speak less to public opinion and more to the intensity exhibited by the subset of people who express their thoughts publicly.

Despite whatever problems there are with polling, the results of the numerous polls discussed above suggest that nearly everyone believes at least one conspiracy theory, if not several. Polls show that the public in the United States and elsewhere also possess many anomalous beliefs. These include paranormal (e.g., ESP) and supernatural (e.g., the coming end times) beliefs, among others. It is important to note that conspiracy and other anomalous beliefs were widespread long before the internet or the supposed “post-truth” era.

Discussion Questions

1. After looking at the polling numbers in this chapter, which ones surprised you the most (least)?
2. Which conspiracy theories not mentioned in this chapter would you like to see polling numbers for?
3. Which conspiracy theories do you think are most popular in your school, town, or state?

Key Terms and Concepts

Anomalous Beliefs

Climate Change Conspiracy Theories

Climate Skepticism

Survey Instrument

Urban Legend

Water Fluoridation

White Replacement Theory

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4

The Psychology and Sociology of Conspiracy Theories

Despite a general proclivity among many to assume that beliefs in conspiracy theories are idiosyncratically held by a few unhinged individuals (an assumption the data in the previous chapter dispels) or the product of random exposure to conspiratorial ideas online, beliefs in conspiracy theories can be systematically explained and accounted for. In this chapter, we focus on the psychological and sociological factors that attract people to conspiracy theories. By *psychological factors*, we mean those arising within an individual's mind, such as cognitive processes, personality traits, and emotional states. By *sociological factors*, we mean those that arise from group membership and that involve group competition.

There are many ways to study beliefs. Before jumping into findings, we wish to provide readers with a broad overview of the most common research designs used to understand the psychological and sociological underpinnings of conspiracy theory beliefs. The first, as we focused on in [chapter 3](#), involves surveying

samples of people about their conspiracy theory beliefs and also asking about their other beliefs, characteristics, and demographics. With such data, researchers can investigate which individual-level factors predict people's conspiracy beliefs. The second is performed with smaller samples of people in laboratory settings. Researchers might, for example, invite subjects into a lab setting, randomly select some of them to receive a treatment that, for example, induces feelings of stress (while the others do not receive that treatment), and then ask each of the participants whether they believe in a conspiracy theory. If those who received the stress-inducing treatment were more likely to believe the conspiracy theory than those who did not, researchers would possess experimental evidence that stress can foster conspiracy beliefs. Unlike in the mass survey setting, the use of randomized treatments in a laboratory setting—that is, experiments—allows researchers to isolate causes of conspiracy theory beliefs. Third, other studies rely on people's written expressions or social media activity. Some such studies examine how people express conspiracy beliefs in letters to the editor of newspapers, comments sections of online news articles, tweets, and Reddit posts.¹ While the written word can surely serve as a window into one's psyche, systematically analyzing text has historically been quite cumbersome. Moreover, only the most politically engaged individuals speak about conspiracy theories and related beliefs on social media—this means that text analysis often generates a skewed picture of the mass public.

Psychological Factors

We begin by exploring the psychological components of conspiracy theory beliefs, as most of the research into conspiracy beliefs—nearly all of which has been conducted in the last fifteen years—was produced by psychologists. A handful of psychological studies were undertaken to better understand conspiracy beliefs in the 1990s, but none of these was part of a concerted research agenda until around 2007, when conspiracy theories about 9/11 and Princess Diana's death sparked enough concern by researchers that they began to systematically study the nature, causes, and consequences of conspiracy theory beliefs. That said, psychologists had been studying other anomalous beliefs more systematically for decades prior to their collective interest in conspiracy theories. The

psychology literature focuses on three potential causes of these beliefs: cognitive traits, personality traits, and psychological conditions. This section will focus mainly on conspiracy theory beliefs but will make reference to the individual-level psychological factors that foster anomalous beliefs as well.

Cognitive Traits

Cognition is the mental process of acquiring knowledge and understanding. Every day we're bombarded with countless data points. Our brains are tasked with making sense of all of that information and learning from it. This process is not identical for everyone; we possess different cognitive traits that lead us to interpret incoming information somewhat differently. These differences can be thought of as "biases" that systematically predispose individuals to be more or less likely to believe (particular types of) conspiracy theories. Here we touch on a few such cognitive biases that are associated with conspiracy theory beliefs. Before doing so, it is critical to note that everyone is afflicted by cognitive biases to one degree or another and, because this is the case, cognitive factors cannot be the only explanation for conspiracy theory beliefs, nor can they explain why people believe some conspiracy theories and not others.

People engage in the *conjunction fallacy* when their reasoning violates the conjunction rule. According to famed economists Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, "perhaps the simplest and the most basic qualitative law of probability is the conjunction rule."² Consider this scenario:

"Linda is 31 years old, single, outspoken and very bright. She majored in philosophy. As a student, she was deeply concerned with issues of discrimination and social justice, and also participated in anti-nuclear demonstrations." Following this description, participants rated the likelihood of a number of statements about Linda, including three key propositions: (i) Linda is an active feminist; (ii) Linda is a bank teller; and (iii) Linda is a bank teller and an active feminist. Thus, participants judge the likelihood of two singular, constituent propositions (one representative and one unrepresentative) and a conjunction of the two propositions. Participants who select the conjunctive statement as being more likely than either individual constituent statement have fallen victim

to the conjunction fallacy; a conjunction cannot be more probable than one of its constituents, because the former is necessarily a more restrictive set of possibilities than the latter.³

To put this another way, if you buy two scratch-off lottery tickets, the odds of both of them winning must be lower than (1) just one of them winning or (2) of neither of them winning. However, people often violate the conjunction rule in their reasoning by believing that two events (with probabilities of occurring less than one) are more likely to occur together (i.e., a joint probability) than individually. People who are more likely to fall victim to this fallacy are also more likely to believe in conspiracy theories and paranormal phenomena.⁴ This makes good sense. After all, many conspiracy theories involve several actors engaged in complicated, convoluted plots that must be orchestrated in concert; the joint probability of each of these moving parts coming off without a hitch is surely quite low.

Some people also exhibit a stronger *need for cognitive closure* than others; this can be thought of as an intolerance for uncertainty. Some people want answers now! In a study examining participants' beliefs in conspiracy theories surrounding the recent European refugee crisis and a hypothetical plane crash, researchers hypothesized that conspiracy theories, because they "offer simple answers" and "explanations for uncertain situations," should be "attractive to individuals who are intolerant of uncertainty and seek cognitive closure."⁵ The findings showed that participants with a high need for cognitive closure were more likely to adopt the conspiracy theories to explain these events when another explanation was unavailable.⁶ It is easy to see how the need for cognitive closure (or, alternatively, an intolerance of uncertainty/ambiguity) can foster beliefs in many conspiracy theories about idiosyncratic, unanticipated events, such as terror attacks, school shootings, and global pandemics. Those living with an anxiety-inducing uncertainty—about what has happened, what will happen next, and why—can find comfort in conspiracy theories because they impose structure (albeit a convoluted one) on an otherwise messy world, thereby reducing anxiety about not having an answer. However, in exchange for certainty, the conspiracy theory beliefs leave people thinking that powerful, unscrupulous actors are orchestrating horrific events as part of a malevolent scheme.

Perhaps through evolutionary processes, people have also

developed psychological *cheater detectors*, or the willingness to suspect others of cheating. Indeed, some have “overactive” cheater detectors, which drive them to suspect others of cheating despite a dearth of confirmatory evidence.⁷ Consider, for example, a scenario in which an expensive house burns down. There is little reason to suspect that a conspiracy is afoot based solely on the information that a fire occurred. But what if it was subsequently discovered that the owners were in serious debt, needed fast cash, and had taken out a large insurance policy on the house only months before it burned? Studies show that when people are made aware of motives, they are more likely to believe that the principal actors engaged in a conspiracy.⁸ In other words, there is a tendency, among some, to make an inferential leap from incentives to conspiracy.

For a real-world example, we could look to the death of Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia in 2016. Scalia’s passing gave then-president Barack Obama the opportunity to shift the balance of the Court in his favor. Since he and his party had something to gain, some (including former president Trump) jumped to the conclusion that Obama had Scalia murdered.⁹ A more sober interpretation might be that an overweight, seventy-nine-year-old smoker with diabetes and heart problems isn’t exactly unlikely to die from natural (i.e., non-homicidal) causes. If we assumed that every time a grandmother passed away the grandchildren expecting to receive an inheritance murdered her, then every grandchild who inherits money must be a murderer! Such a view is obviously untenable.

These examples also showcase another cognitive bias that impacts our reasoning capabilities: *intentionality bias*. This is the tendency to believe that, instead of coincidence, actions and events are the product of intentionality. Imagine standing in a crowded bar when someone bumps you from behind. Most are willing to accept that this nudge was accidental—the bar is, after all, crowded and difficult to navigate. Some, however, will perceive the nudge as an intentional slight; interestingly enough, one’s propensity toward engaging in intentionality bias increases with alcohol consumption!¹⁰ People who are more prone to engaging in intentionality bias than others are also more likely to believe in conspiracy theories.¹¹ Indeed, alleged conspiracies are precisely the intentional actions used to account for coincidental, idiosyncratic, and unpredictable—and, therefore, unpreventable—events, like natural disasters and

pandemics.

Similarly, people have evolved to see patterns in what they observe. *Patternicity* helps people make sense of the world around them by connecting objects, events, and occurrences to make meaning. People also “need to detect existing patterns in order to function well in their physical and social environment; however, this process also leads them to sometimes detect patterns in chaotic or randomly generated stimuli.”¹² In other words, those who exhibit heightened levels of this trait are likely to see patterns where none exist; these people are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories as well.¹³

Conspiracy beliefs can also be promoted by the way people innately navigate the information environment. Some researchers, such as Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule, argue that belief in conspiracy theories stems from *crippled epistemologies*.¹⁴ According to Sunstein and Vermeule, the best way to understand conspiracy beliefs is

to examine how people acquire information. For most of what they believe that they know, human beings lack personal or direct information; they must rely on what other people think. In some domains, people suffer from a “crippled epistemology,” in the sense that they know very few things, and what they know is wrong. Many extremists fall in this category; their extremism stems not from irrationality, but from the fact that they have little (relevant) information, and their extremist views are supported by what little they know. Conspiracy theorizing often has the same feature. Those who believe that Israel was responsible for the attacks of 9/11, or that the Central Intelligence Agency killed President Kennedy, may well be responding quite rationally to the informational signals that they receive.¹⁵

People often pick information sources that comport with what they already believe. These choices determine the information that they will receive; their information environments then reinforce (or potentially polarize) their personal ideologies. People look to the news the way a drunk looks to a lamp-post—not for illumination, but rather for reinforcement! Despite bringing satisfaction, this is not a reliable strategy for procuring accurate information.

An implication of the crippled epistemology argument is that many people’s expressed opinions are nothing more than the parroting of a trusted opinion leader’s pronouncements—a

politician, entertainer, public intellectual, media personality, or social leader who has a platform and a message.¹⁶ This is often why political arguments end in stalemate: when opinions are not arrived at through careful reasoning to begin with, they cannot be (easily) altered by reason or evidence.¹⁷

People also have a natural tendency to experience cognitive dissonance—a psychological discomfort—when they are confronted with information that challenges preexisting beliefs, values, and worldviews. The (subconscious) attempt to avoid this cognitive dissonance, or discomfort, is *motivated reasoning*.¹⁸ Motivated reasoning entails intentionally ignoring, avoiding, or otherwise reasoning away information that is incongruent with preexisting beliefs (e.g., by assuming the information is incorrect or biased). When engaging in motivated reasoning (as everyone does!), people might hold evidence in favor of an opposing position to a higher standard than they hold evidence that supports their own position.¹⁹ They might, alternatively, find a way to excuse their actions or the actions of groups with which they identify, even though they would condemn similar actions perpetrated by an opposing group.²⁰ They could also selectively pay attention to only information that comports with preexisting beliefs, which is a form of motivated reasoning called *confirmation bias*. Ultimately, motivated reasoning encourages people to accept conspiracy theories that demonize their opponents and their opponents' ideas but reject theories that are critical of their own ideas or those of the groups with which they identify.²¹ Hence, we rarely see Jews engaging in anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, just as we infrequently observe Democrats accusing fellow Democrats of conspiring.

Finally, those exhibiting a weaker capacity for *analytic thinking*—the process of fact-checking and systematically interrogating the veracity of claims—are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories.²² Simply put, the extent to which one is unable to carefully examine the logic behind and evidence for causal claims will determine how likely one will be to accept convoluted explanations regarding conspiratorial machinations. Similarly, educational attainment is negatively related to the probability of believing conspiracy theories—presumably, education fosters analytical thinking capabilities, thereby reducing conspiracism.²³ Indeed, evidence shows that courses designed to bolster critical thinking skills can foster a resistant to conspiratorial thinking.²⁴ Despite what

might seem like an obvious relationship between education and conspiracy beliefs in terms of direction, this relationship also tends to be weak or moderate in strength. In other words, education is not in itself a solution to conspiracy beliefs. It is not difficult to find examples of highly educated people that believe in conspiracy theories, as we've seen in previous examples!

Personality Traits

In addition to psychological hard wiring—what we broadly referred to as cognitive traits—*personality traits*, habitual patterns of thought and emotion that distinguish people from each other, are also associated with conspiracy beliefs. We begin with *attachment styles*, the ways adults view and interact with others. Researchers have identified four distinct styles: secure, anxious, avoidant, and fearful. One who becomes dependent on another person or other persons and experiences anxiety when separated is said to have an *anxious attachment style*.²⁵ People showing signs of an anxious attachment style are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories.²⁶ Scholars have also shown that the *avoidant attachment style*, “because of its emphasis on self-reliance, its motivation to suppress psychological distress, and a Manichean view of the world based on a neat distinction between good and bad,” is associated with belief in conspiracy theories.²⁷

The *need for uniqueness* is a desire to feel different from others, even special. Those with a higher need for uniqueness exhibit higher levels of conspiracy thinking and higher levels of belief in specific conspiracy theories.²⁸ This is likely because conspiracy theories are often presented as special knowledge, available only to those who are uniquely capable of seeing “what’s really going on.” Relatedly, *narcissism*, or an elevated sense of self-importance, also predicts belief in conspiracy theories.²⁹ Conspiracy believers tend to see themselves as more virtuous, moral, and intelligent because of their ability to understand the complicated, secretive plots they perceive. This is the same for those with heightened levels of *national narcissism*—an elevated sense that one’s nation is great and that this greatness has not been appropriately recognized.³⁰ Similarly, some studies find that *dogmatism*—a tendency to hold beliefs so strongly that adherents cannot rationally discuss or negotiate those beliefs or bend in the face of evidence or argument

—is related to conspiracy theory beliefs.³¹ Dogmatism may lead people to cling to conspiracy beliefs once those beliefs are formed, complicating efforts at disabusing people of conspiracy beliefs.

Also related to narcissism are *Machiavellianism* and *psychopathy*; with narcissism, these three traits comprise what is often referred to as the *dark triad*. Machiavellianism refers to a tendency to strategically manipulate others; people exhibiting this trait also tend to be distrustful of others.³² Some studies find that those most likely to believe conspiracy theories are also more likely than others to engage in conspiring.³³ People showing elevated levels of psychopathy are characterized as being selfish, aggressive, and impulsive; this trait is also related to conspiracy theory beliefs.³⁴

People who have a hard time separating fact from fantasy are also prone to believing in dubious ideas. Delusions are beliefs that are held rather strongly but that contradict available evidence or shared reality. The tendency to hold delusional beliefs, *delusional thinking*, has been found to be related to conspiracy theory beliefs.³⁵ *Magical thinking* refers to a general style of thinking whereby events and people are connected through supernatural forces. For example, a magical thinker might believe that thoughts can influence external events and might shout “I want to die” into a mirror five times to imminently bring about death.³⁶ *Schizotypy* refers to a group of personality characteristics—those exhibiting the highest levels of schizotypy are likely to be afflicted by psychosis and schizophrenia. *Hallucination proneness* involves, at the high end, an inability to distinguish between internally and externally generated sensations.³⁷ People prone to hallucinations have been shown to be the most likely to report having alien contact.³⁸ Each



Figure 4-1. Statue of Niccolò Machiavelli. Machiavelli was a

philosopher, historian, and writer; Machiavellianism is named after him and his political philosophy.

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of these traits—delusional thinking, magical thinking, schizotypy, and hallucination proneness—has predicted beliefs in (at least some) conspiracy theories and other dubious ideas.³⁹

Manichean thinking—a tendency to dichotomize the world in terms of good and evil—is also correlated with conspiracy thinking and a wide range of specific conspiracy beliefs.⁴⁰ It is intuitive that Manichean thinking would encourage conspiracy beliefs to some extent: conspiracy theories posit that evil groups are working against the innocent public. The *authoritarian personality* is a trait that predicts obedience to authority and a desire to oppress subordinates.⁴¹ Each of these traits are related to conspiracy beliefs.⁴² That said, authoritarianism has the most tenuous link to conspiracy beliefs. Given that it leads people to be more subservient to authority, rather than more suspicious of it, we might suspect that authoritarianism would lead people to reject conspiracy theories, since many of those theories challenge authority.

Paranormal ideation (the tendency to believe in paranormal phenomena), *supernatural ideation* (the tendency to believe in supernatural phenomena), and conspiracy beliefs also tend to be correlated.⁴³ This may be because paranormal beliefs, supernatural beliefs, and conspiracy beliefs share a common denominator: the willingness to believe ideas that lack strong evidence. Therefore, it is likely that people who subscribe strongly to these beliefs do so because they, as discussed earlier, suffer an inability to separate fact from fantasy.

Of course, this is not to say that conspiracy theory believers are necessarily delusional, paranoid, or, more generally, “crazy.” Fairly few individuals exhibit the types of personality traits explored above, yet most people believe in at least one conspiracy theory. Hence disconcerting personality traits cannot, on their own, explain the prevalence of conspiracy beliefs. Moreover, we strongly discourage readers from assuming that conspiracy believers are psychologically abnormal or unhealthy—that is, from *pathologizing* them. As the discussion above suggests, the study of conspiracy theory beliefs has been motivated by the historical tendency of researchers across fields to view conspiracy theorists as deranged in

some way. This perspective has some value but is also flawed: while conspiracy believers sometimes exhibit socially undesirable psychological traits and tendencies, conspiracy theories are also not the exclusive province of the mentally deviant or those on fringes of society.

In [Figure 4-2](#), we show the correlations between conspiracy thinking—the general predisposition to see the world in conspiratorial terms—and a variety of psychological traits we discuss above, as well as some new ones. For example, Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy—the dark triad—are all positively correlated with conspiracy thinking, as is dogmatism. We also find that conspiracy thinking is positively correlated with *anomie*, which is a feeling of discontent with the state of society (for example, those high in

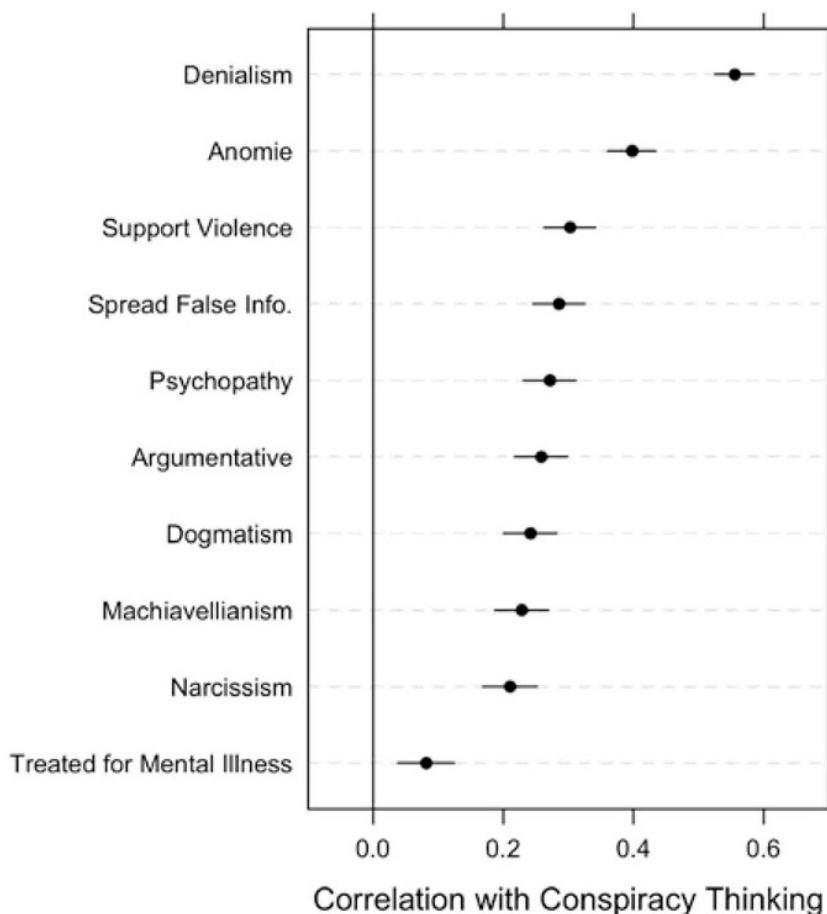


Figure 4-2. Correlation between conspiracy thinking and various psychological traits. Horizontal bars represent 95 percent confidence intervals.

Source: October 2020 Qualtrics study (see [appendix](#) for details)

anomie strongly agree with sentiments such as, “The situation of the average person is getting worse”).⁴⁴ Those who rank high in conspiracy thinking are also more likely to be argumentative, to knowingly share false information online, and to support the use of political violence. The strongest relationship involves *denialism*, which is a tendency to reject authoritative information, regardless of the topic or specific source of that information.⁴⁵ The weakest relationship involves being treated for mental illness: as we

cautioned above, we should not pathologize conspiracy-minded individuals or assume that they suffer personality disorders or mental illness, even though this is true for a small subset of such individuals.

Psychological Conditions

By psychological conditions, we refer not to disorders but rather to temporary emotional states that individuals experience. These could manifest as, or be indicative of, a psychopathology, but not necessarily. Many conditions are related to belief in conspiracy theories, ranging from boredom to more severe conditions, such as suicidal thinking.⁴⁶ To begin, *paranoia*, perhaps the psychological condition most often considered in popular discussions to drive conspiracy theory beliefs, refers to an individual's irrational fears that others are "out to get" them.⁴⁷ It has been identified in some studies as predicting conspiracy beliefs, but we must emphasize that paranoia is not synonymous with conspiracy theory beliefs, nor should we assume that those who believe in conspiracy theories are prone to paranoia.⁴⁸ Unfortunately, the colloquial use of the term "paranoia" (similar to the colloquial use of "psycho") has contributed heavily to the historical tendency to pathologize the conspiracy believers that we discussed above. One way to think about the difference is that paranoia has to do with threats to oneself, whereas conspiracy theories claim that groups are out to get "us."



Figure 4-3. Conspiracy theories address another group, “they,” doing harm to “us”; paranoia, however, addresses others harming “me.”

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Studies have also shown that feelings of powerlessness, social exclusion, uncertainty, anxiety, and of a lack of control are also correlated with conspiracy theory beliefs.⁴⁹ People who feel excluded, controlled by others, ineffectual, and doubtful about the future are likely to turn to conspiracy theories as a way to make sense of their perceived position, or perhaps as a coping mechanism. We will return to this idea in the following chapter when discussing the relationship between politics and conspiracy theory beliefs.

Criticisms of the Psychological Approach

Researchers have identified dozens of psychological factors that predict, with varying degrees of accuracy, belief in conspiracy theories. Indeed, it has become a cottage industry, with new studies continually detailing how a given psychological process, trait, or state predicts belief in one conspiracy theory or another. While the growing literature shows that individual psychological differences play an important role in determining whether a person will adopt

a conspiracy belief or not, some critiques are in order.

First, the factors associated with belief in one conspiracy theory may not be associated with belief in other conspiracy theories. Moreover, a given psychological trait or condition might lead someone to believe in certain conspiracy theories but at the same time to reject others. For example, we would probably not expect that people who believe that a conspiracy was behind JFK's assassination are particularly delusional or paranoid, whereas these traits might be more strongly connected to beliefs about the government spreading mind-control drugs in aircraft "chem trails." Simply put, it is not yet clear how durable the effect of each psychological factor is across the wide and infinite range of conspiracy theories.

Second, the literature is sometimes contradictory. Authoritarianism, for example, is a statistically significant—sometimes strong—predictor of conspiracy beliefs in some studies, but not in others.⁵⁰ Furthermore, while authoritarianism it is not a strong predictor of belief in either the Birther or 9/11 Truther theories, it predicts believing in both theories simultaneously, for reasons that are not entirely clear.⁵¹

Third, many of the findings may lack external validity, meaning that the factors that affect beliefs in a laboratory or survey environment may not have any effect in the real world. To wit, the psychological literature fails to account for the role of situational factors, such as the broader social (e.g., state of the economy, war) and political environments (e.g., campaigns, polarization) in which media and leaders transmit information to the masses.

Sociological Factors

Conspiracy theories focus on groups working in secret against other groups (or the whole). The victimized group could be small (e.g., the hard-working citizens of a small town) or large (e.g., all Americans). Sociological approaches to conspiracy theories begin with groups and group conflict. By groups, we refer to stable aggregates of individuals that share interests, seek cooperation, and compete for power.⁵² Groups can be based upon national, regional, religious, language, class, occupational, partisan, racial, and ethnic distinctions, to name the predominant categories. Some groups are more diffuse than others; "women" or "men," for instance, are not

particularly cohesive or organized groups, given their size, diversity, and lack of organization.

The specific circumstances members of a group find themselves in can determine their beliefs. For example, some Black Americans—given a history of slavery, harassment, and discrimination by powerful forces, institutions, and individuals—are prone to anticipating future conspiracies or believing in conspiracy theories about their eradication, sterilization, and subjugation.⁵³ African American film director Spike Lee, in the context of a discussion of conspiracy theories about the role of the US government in the 2005 New Orleans levy failure during Hurricane Katrina, expresses the historical group element behind some conspiracy theories quite succinctly:

It's not far-fetched . . . a choice had to be made. To save one neighborhood, [you have to] flood another neighborhood. Look if we're in LA, and there is an emergency situation, and we call from Beverly Hills or we call from Compton, which one are the cops coming to first. . . . Do you think that election in 2000 was fair? You don't think that was rigged? If they can rig an election they can do anything! With the history of this country—you ever heard of [the] Tuskegee Experiments? There are many other examples, if we go down the line, where stuff like this happened to African American people. I don't put anything past the American Government when it comes to people of color in this country.⁵⁴

As in this instance, group membership—and the experiences, struggles, and history that accompany groups—tends to heavily influence which conspiracy theories people believe in.

Group identification can also predict which conspiracy theories members will believe in because such identities provide self-esteem and a sense of belonging. Attacks on one's group can be easily taken as attacks on oneself, and competing out-groups are often viewed as biased, immoral, or ill-intentioned. Further, what benefits one's own group is often confused with justice.

Thus, people can be quick to think and act upon in- and out-group identities, sometimes with troubling results. Group-centered conspiracy theories can be aided by a collective narcissism and by motivated reasoning, which can lead members to ignore or dismiss the bad actions of their own group and concentrate only on (what they perceive to be) the bad actions of competing groups.⁵⁵ Motivated reasoning and group competition are intimately linked to

the extent that people's preexisting beliefs, values, and worldviews inform and reinforce group membership.

Some group-centered conspiracy theories arise when group members feel their interests are threatened. Christians, for example, are more likely than non-Christians to believe that Starbucks is conspiring against Christmas;⁵⁶ Christians and Muslims are more likely than Jews to believe in conspiracy theories about Jews attempting to take over the world;⁵⁷ people with New Age beliefs are more likely than Catholics to believe in Da Vinci Code conspiracy theories;⁵⁸ partisans are more likely to believe the opposing party, rather than their own, is conspiring against them.⁵⁹ Even regional conspiracy theories can manifest when important interests are at stake. For example, many conspiracy theories accused either slaveholders or abolitionists prior to the Civil War; these were differentially believed in the North and South.⁶⁰ As many of these examples make clear, group-centered conspiracy theories can promote group prejudices or reinforce existing ones.⁶¹

Group members often take cues—implicit or explicit suggestions about what is factually correct, moral, or virtuous—from group leaders (at least in cases where the group is organized with visible leadership). Partisan groups are particularly susceptible to cues from party leaders because those leaders reach large audiences through the mainstream media. When party leaders engage in conspiracy theorizing, the press tends to cover it, which can subsequently give the impression that such theories have broad support. But it is important to understand that conspiracy theories coming from partisan leaders tend not to have much reach beyond like-minded partisans who are already disposed to conspiracy theorizing—the same goes for other groups.

In [Figure 4-4](#), we present correlations between conspiracy thinking and a host of sociodemographic characteristics. As we would expect, given the discussion above about the role of race, ethnicity, and religion, we find that Blacks, Hispanics, and people who regularly attend church (a proxy for religiosity) generally exhibit higher levels of conspiracy thinking than the relatively less religious or members of dominant racial/ethnic groups (like whites). That said, these relationships are quite weak, especially compared to those presented in [Figure 4-2](#)—various psychological traits and conditions are much more strongly correlated with conspiracy thinking than observable sociodemographic

characteristics.

We also observe negative (but still fairly weak) correlations between conspiracy thinking and age, educational attainment, and household income. In other words, younger people, those with lower levels of education, and those with lower household incomes are likely to exhibit higher levels of conspiracy thinking than the relatively old, highly educated, and wealthy.

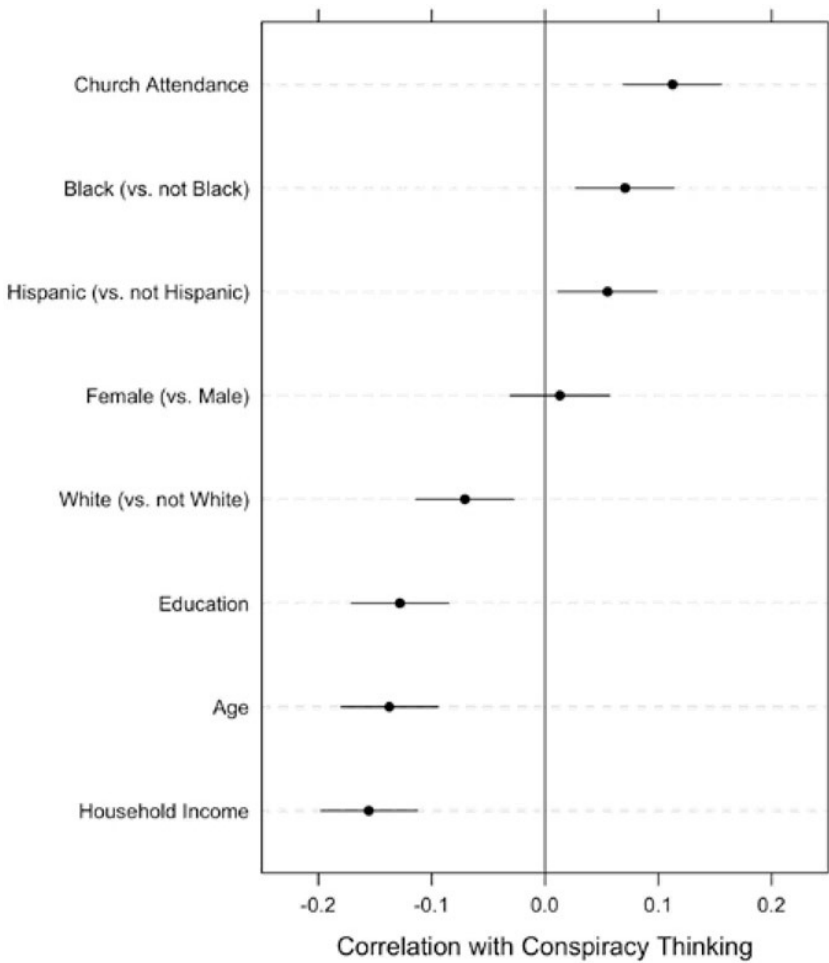


Figure 4-4. Correlation between conspiracy thinking and various sociodemographic characteristics. Horizontal bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Source: May 2021 Qualtrics study (see [appendix](#) for details)

One explanation of the relationship with education is, perhaps, somewhat intuitive: all else equal, the stronger one's base of knowledge and critical thinking skills, the less likely one will be to buy into convoluted plots involving a conspiracy. As for the negative relationship with age and household income, some scholarship theorizes that the relatively powerless who occupy the lower levels of social and economic hierarchies are more likely to explain their lot in life using conspiracy theories.⁶² We will discuss a theory similar to this one—which involves political powerlessness, specifically—in the next chapter.

Conclusion

Psychologists have identified numerous characteristics that are associated with beliefs in conspiracy theories. We can broadly categorize these as cognitive factors, personality traits, and psychological conditions. While these factors can shed light on which specific individuals are, all else equal, more likely to see the world in conspiratorial terms, they do not address the broader social and political factors that will bring people into contact with conspiracy theories in the first place, and they often afflict only a small proportion of individuals.

Sociological factors, focusing on group competition, drive the selection of conspiracy theories (i.e., which conspiracy theories a person will believe in). Individuals tend to believe in the conspiracy theories that accuse competing groups, but they are less willing to believe theories that accuse their own group. This tendency has clear implications for the grounds on which groups compete, which we will explore in the context of politics in the next chapter.

Discussion Questions

1. In thinking about any conspiracy theories you might believe, which ones might be the product of the psychological or social factors mentioned in this chapter?
2. Thinking about conversations you have had about conspiracy theories lately, have you found that believers are open to argument and evidence, or have they been unwilling to compromise?
3. Thinking about conspiracy theories you might have heard

recently, which groups were being accused of conspiring, and which groups were doing the accusing?

Key Terms and Concepts

Analytical Thinking

Anomie

Anxious Attachment Style

Authoritarianism/Authoritarian Personality

Avoidant Attachment Style

Cheater Detector

Cognition

Confirmation Bias

Conjunction Fallacy

Crippled Epistemologies

Dark Triad

Delusional Thinking

Denialism

Dogmatism

Hallucination Proneness

Intentionality Bias

Machiavellianism

Magical Thinking

Manichean Thinking

Motivated Reasoning

Narcissism

National Narcissism

Need for Cognitive Closure

Need for Uniqueness

Paranoia

Paranormal Ideation

Patternicity

Personality Traits

Psychological Factors

Psychopathy

Schizotypy

Sociological Factors

Supernatural Ideation

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5

The Politics of Conspiracy Theories

Conspiracy theories are inherently political. They involve questions of who has power and what those with power are doing with it when no one is looking. Even the zaniest conspiracy theories on their face—like those claiming that interdimensional lizard people rule the planet, for example—make implicit political claims about important truths being hidden from the public and power being exercised by secretive, unaccountable actors that wish to do “us” harm. This chapter explores the political factors affecting how and why people believe, spread, or otherwise act on conspiracy theories. This includes an examination of how opinions form in the mass public, how elites influence the masses, and how political conditions foster conspiracy theories.

Power and Conspiracy Theories

Conspiracy theories accuse people of working together in secret for purposes that contravene the common good. Those accused of conspiring are either politically, economically, or in some other way powerful, or at least presumed to be powerful in some way. *Power*,

in this sense, is the ability to affect change in a desired direction, particularly by manipulating what other people think and do. Thus, conspiracy theories are often about the “the elites” generally, or particular groups of elites more specifically. *Elites* are people who have power in society and can affect the beliefs and behaviors of other people. They are politicians (e.g., presidents, congresspeople), the wealthy (e.g., the Rothschilds, the Rockefellers, George Soros), business leaders (e.g., Bill Gates, the Koch Brothers), media personalities (e.g., Tom Hanks, Oprah Winfrey), and other societal leaders. Since conspiracy theories often accuse groups of (negatively) impacting others in some way, it is only natural for conspiracy theories to accuse people who currently possess real and significant power and are already impacting the lives of others in some way. Rarely do we hear about the homeless, immigrants, children, or other relatively powerless groups orchestrating massive conspiracies; instead, weak and vulnerable groups are often thought of as pawns in the machinations of the powerful. For example, the “white replacement” theory argues that powerful government and corporate leaders are allowing low-skilled non-white individuals into the United States to take jobs from, and eventually replace, white people and culture.

That the powerful (or those perceived to be powerful) are most frequently accused of conspiring might seem rather obvious given that, by the time you are reading this book, you likely have already encountered dozens of conspiracy theories that accuse dominant groups and powerful individuals. However, political philosopher Machiavelli suggested centuries ago that accusing only the powerful of conspiring might miss the mark. Machiavelli, in writing about political strategy, suggests that we should be on the lookout for conspiracies orchestrated by the relatively weak and powerless because it is these individuals and groups, not the strong and powerful, who need to conspire in darkness to achieve their ends—the strong can already get what they want using brute force.¹ For example, many accused President George W. Bush of orchestrating the 9/11 terror attacks as a pretense for the war in Iraq. What these conspiracy theorists fail to consider is that American presidents have the power (a blend of hard and soft power) to engage in war without any real pretense and with few checks on their war-making power. Consider that in 2018 the White House was directing military activities in seven different countries without formal

declarations of war, galvanizing events, or fanfare.² During the final year of the Obama Administration, the US military dropped more than twenty-six thousand bombs, or “nearly three bombs every hour, 24 hours a day,” even though few Americans knew their country was engaged in a war or with whom.³ This isn’t to say that the conspiracy theories about 9/11 are necessarily false but rather that power itself allows one to achieve many goals, thereby alleviating the need to conspire.

That said, powerful people do conspire to get what they want from time to time. One reason could be that modern democracies limit and temper power, thereby incentivizing secretive actions in some instances. The Watergate conspiracy (note: this is a real conspiracy, not a conspiracy theory!) was organized not because Richard Nixon had too much power but because he was fearful of his political competitors. After the break-in was discovered, the cover-up was orchestrated because Nixon wanted to avoid being held accountable for his actions.

It is also important to consider that the weak often engage in misconduct of various sorts as well: no group of people is immune from temptation. One’s position in a social hierarchy is unrelated to the morality (or lack thereof) of one’s intentions. Likely because the powerful can do far more harm to the common good than the less powerful can, conspiracy theories tend to accuse those (supposedly) holding power rather than those (supposedly) not. Thus, there seems to be a natural, ubiquitous aversion to power that conspiracy theories take advantage of. Consider, for example, how the many conspiracy theories accusing “big pharma” or “big agriculture” are framed: accusers are quick to point out the size, profitability, and success of the supposed conspirators they are implicating (in this case corporations), as if size, profitability, and success naturally imply guilt.⁴



Figure 5-1. The Watergate office building in Washington, DC, where burglars were caught breaking into the Democratic National Committee headquarters.

GettyImages

Some argue that this aversion to power stems from evolution: that early in human history, it was particularly wise to be suspicious of powerful outsiders.⁵ Humans who were suspicious were prepared for attacks and, therefore, more likely to survive and pass on their genes and life-preserving behavioral tendencies. People who were less suspicious were more susceptible to attack and, therefore, less likely to pass on their genes. Such an evolutionary view could explain (rather than justify) the aversion toward the powerful, particularly powerful outsiders.⁶

The Locus of Power

Where does power lie? Many conspiracy theories accuse organizations such as the *Freemasons* (a long-standing fraternal organization), the *Bilderbergers* (a group of political and economic elites who meet yearly to discuss salient issues), and the *Skull & Bones* society (a secret society of senior undergraduates at Yale University) of secretly possessing and abusing power.⁷ Other conspiracy theories accuse organizations and people that might not actually exist, like the *Illuminati*, of conspiring. Take for example,

the UK's David Icke, a professional conspiracy theorist whose reptilian elite theory begins with the rather mundane assertion (at least compared to his other conspiracy theories) that a “sinister network of families” secretly control humanity:

The Republican and Democratic parties, and their equivalents around the world, are owned by Illuminati bloodlines through the “transnational corporation” structure of the secret society web. . . . The Rothschild Illuminati networks . . . run the government no matter who “wins” an election.⁸

Of course, Republicans and Democrats exist, as do descendants of the Rothschild banking family; it is less clear that Illuminati networks exist. Regardless, Icke attributes the power of this network to less mundane, nonhuman factors:

It became clear to me that the Illuminati bloodlines are human-reptilian hybrids. . . . The Rothschilds and the bloodline family network obsessively and incessantly interbreed because they are seeking to retain their “special” genetics which would be quickly diluted by breeding with the general population. . . . The reptilian race covertly controlling human society is from a dimension of reality very close to this one, but beyond visible light and that's why we don't see them. They can move in and out of visible light, however, and there are reptilian “cities” and bases inside the Earth. Some top-secret underground military bases connect with them. The hybrid bloodlines, like the Rothschilds, serve their agenda on the surface and within visible light.⁹

According to Icke, the lizard-human hybrids are the leaders of every country, political party, royal family, and corporation; thus, political and economic elites are not only inhuman but they may not even be observable in visible light! It is also worth noticing some similarities between such ideas and historical anti-Semitic caricatures of Jewish people—who were frequently portrayed as deformed or even subhuman—that breathed life into anti-Semitic conspiracy theories.¹⁰ Icke's reptilian elite theory, while not convincing many according to public opinion polls, has had a strong cultural impact.¹¹

Jim Marrs, an American conspiracy theorist famous for proffering JFK assassination theories, has developed an equally disturbing, albeit less supernatural, view of power. Marrs (now deceased) suggests that secretive elites are currently attempting to

reduce the world population:

We now live in a culture of death and decay that has been imposed upon us by a small group of wealthy elites that publicly espouses involuntary population reduction. We're being killed by chemicals, genetically modified organisms (GMO's), dyes, additives, plastics, tainted water, and polluted air. . . . We are not aware of these things because precious few recognize that we are being psychologically programmed by a mass media controlled by a mere handful of corporate owners. . . . [This] ensures that we cannot protest the population reduction that threatens our very lives.¹²

Of course, there is little evidence that population reduction is taking place; to the contrary, life spans have increased across the globe compared to historical estimates, as has the size of the world's population. Perhaps more importantly, there isn't widely accepted scientific evidence that population reduction would positively impact those who remained, even though it is often assumed that such a scenario would benefit the elite who engineered it.

Longtime political activist and presidential candidate Lyndon LaRouche (now deceased) exhibited concerns similar to those of Marrs but posited a different set of elite conspirators—in particular, the Queen of England.¹³ From his organization, LaRouchePAC:

[T]he 9/11 attacks on Manhattan (and Washington) were run by the British system, and only the Queen, under that system, had the authority to give the go-ahead. But what supplements that case in a most fascinating way, is that Lyndon LaRouche was able in essence to forecast the 9/11 attacks a full eight months before they occurred.¹⁴

Prior to this, LaRouche spent much of the 1980s espousing conspiracy theories about AIDS, former vice president Walter Mondale, and the International Monetary Fund.¹⁵ LaRouche urged Californians to vote to quarantine people who had contracted HIV/AIDS.¹⁶

Communications professor-turned-conspiracy theorist James Tracy quickly became (in)famous following the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School. He accused the media of failing to report the true circumstances of the shooting, which, in his telling, involved powerful actors, perhaps within the Obama administration, working behind the scenes to orchestrate a hoax.

Tracy was eventually fired by his university in 2016 after it became publicly known that he had demanded that the parents of slain Sandy Hook children provide proof that their children had ever existed. To document his claims, Tracy contributed to the book *No One Died at Sandy Hook*, which begins with the following declaration:¹⁷

We are saying that Sandy Hook did not happen as we have been told. We also think the Boston Marathon bombing did not happen as we have been told. We think these events are part of a pattern that stretches at least as far back as the murder of John F. Kennedy, likely farther. These “false flag” events are part of a conspiracy, a vast conspiracy. You have been taught to laugh now. But there is nothing funny here.

Some theories, like the many involving the Sandy Hook Elementary tragedy, hold that *false flag* events—tragedies orchestrated by the government or other powerful actors, usually for the purpose of swaying public opinion—are designed to limit gun rights. Many known and unknown conspiracy theorists took to harassing the parents of the slain Sandy Hook children; this subsequently led the parents to organize and combat online conspiracy harassment, which culminated in conspiracy-theorist-in-chief Alex Jones being ordered to pay millions in compensatory and punitive damages to some families.¹⁸

Similar to conspiracy theories about false flag events, conspiracy theories about a so-called *deep state* accuse secret actors within government—who are unelected and therefore unaccountable to the citizenry—of controlling political circumstances and government actions. Ideas about the existence of a deep state are ubiquitous in popular culture, including in countries beyond the United States.¹⁹ For example, Oliver Stone’s *JFK* movie focuses on the involvement of deep state actors in the assassination of President Kennedy; likewise, the television series *The X-Files* is about the machinations of deep state actors working in league with aliens.

The white replacement (or “white genocide”) conspiracy theory asserts that corporations and governments are conspiring to bring inexpensive foreign workers to white majority countries (e.g., Europe, the United States, New Zealand, and Australia) to replace white workers. In addition to taking jobs from whites, the theory holds that nonwhite foreigners will displace European culture and,

through increased reproduction rates, outnumber Europeans. This theory is widely believed across Europe; for example, about 50 percent of the French believe it.²⁰ Brenton Tarrant, the Australian who murdered fifty Muslims at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, provided a manifesto—which he titled “The Great Replacement”—to explain his deadly actions:

We are experiencing an invasion on a level never seen before in history. Millions of people pouring across our borders, legally. Invited by the state and corporate entities to replace the White people who have failed to reproduce, failed to create the cheap labour, new consumers and tax base that the corporations and states need to thrive. This crisis of mass immigration and sub-replacement fertility is an assault on the European people that, if not combated, will ultimately result in the complete racial and cultural replacement of the European people.²¹

This manifesto was quickly banned by government censors in New Zealand; however, other mass shooters have mimicked the conspiratorial and racist arguments contained in Tarrant’s manifesto.²²

Believers in both Sandy Hook and white replacement theories have acted against vulnerable individuals rather than against the “true” culprits of their theories: the powerful puppet masters behind the false flag attacks and immigration. As such, Sandy Hook families have endured harassment from those wanting to prove that the shooting was a false flag. Innocent people (for example, at Christchurch, New Zealand; the Tree of Life Synagogue, in Pittsburgh; or the Tops Friendly Markets, in Buffalo) have been murdered in the name of stopping “white replacement” from happening. Of course, none of the people harmed was thought to be the mastermind of the supposed plots.

Conspiracy theories are very similar to populist appeals. *Populism* is a political worldview in which politicians and experts are disconnected from the mass public, cannot be trusted, and are likely engaged in conspiracies against “the people.” Populism combines *anti-elitism* (a rejection of political and social leaders), and sometimes *anti-intellectualism* (a rejection of experts and expertise), with the rejection of *pluralism* (the idea that society is comprised of many varied groups, each in democratic competition to secure its political goals) so that “the people” have a singular will that only

outsiders and enemies reject.²³ Conspiracy theories tend to fit populist narratives quite well because conspiracy theories tend to accuse powerful elites and posit a Manichean (i.e., good versus evil) narrative in which political competitors are both evil and enemies of the good people. We will return to the overlap between conspiracy thinking, populism, and Manichean thinking in the following chapter. For now, we note that both populism and Manicheanism are positively correlated with conspiracy thinking, as can be seen in [Figure 5-2](#). Indeed, of various political orientations and attitudes, which will be discussed in greater detail below, these two orientations are most strongly correlated with the general tendency to interpret events and circumstances in conspiratorial terms.

The conspiracy theorizing in politics can lead to lower or higher participation in politics. If one believed that the political system was rigged, one might prefer to “sit this one out” and not vote, donate, or volunteer for political campaigns. There is some evidence of this: those exhibiting the highest levels of conspiracy thinking were less likely to vote in the 2012 presidential election. The same people were also less likely to invest in the stock market, a rough indicator of one’s tendency (or lack thereof) to trust governmental, social, or economic institutions.²⁴ Why take part in a rigged system? This intuition aside, research finds that when politicians make specific, conspiracy-laced appeals to conspiracy-minded audiences, they can attract new voters and expand their coalition.²⁵ We will return to this idea in [chapter 6](#).

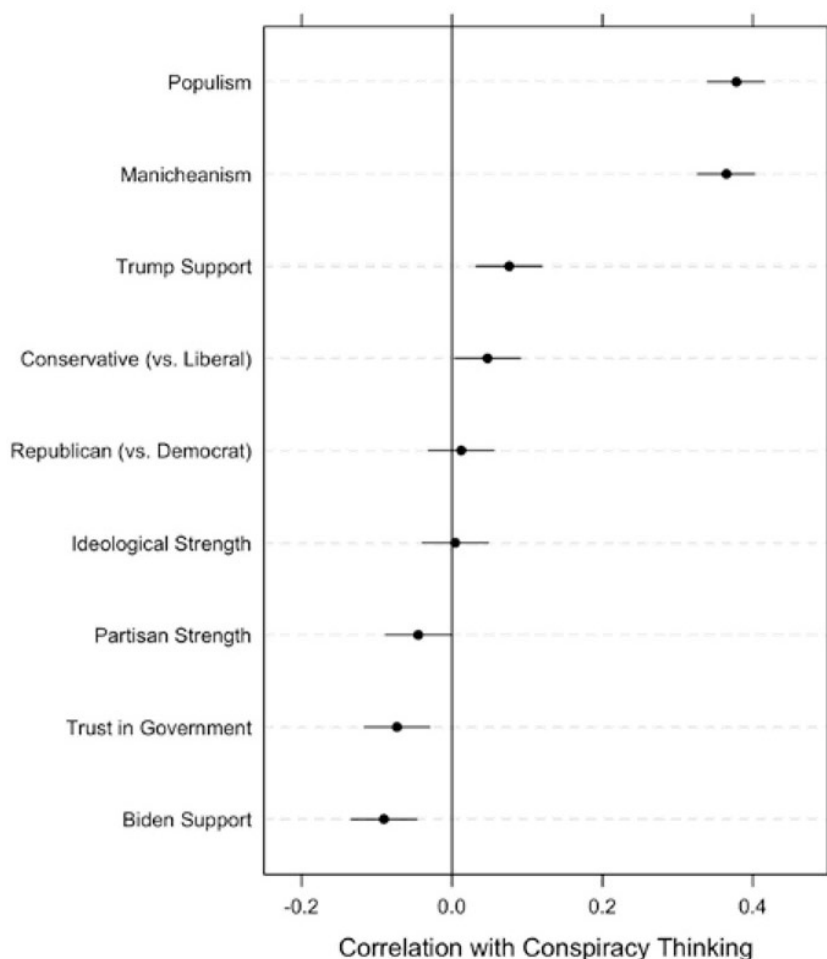


Figure 5-2. Correlation between conspiracy thinking and various political orientations and attitudes. Horizontal bars represent 95 percent confidence intervals.

Source: October 2020 Qualtrics study (see [appendix](#) for details)

To summarize this section, conspiracy theories are inherently about power, often focusing explicitly on making sense of who has power and why, and how they are wielding their power. Therefore, powerful people tend to be lightning rods for conspiratorial accusations even though less powerful people oftentimes pay the price for conspiracy theories.

Partisan Conspiracy Theorizing

Some people are animated by conspiracy theories that accuse the entirety of the power structure; for them, the conspirators' place in group conflict matters little. Conspiracy theorist Jim Marrs, for example, explains that partisanship is but a ruse:

With secretive societies, such as the Council on Foreign Relations, providing leadership for both the Democratic and Republican parties, there has been no significant change in U.S. foreign policy since World War II. The global elite that control both parties sees to it that no one who is not aligned with globalist goals gains the presidency. No effort is spared to keep America in perpetual war, the basis for the elite's global agenda.²⁶

However, many people tend to focus their conspiracy theorizing on specific partisan groups. Thus, many conspiracy theories about the government aren't so much about the generalized concept of "government" as much as they are about the particular party (perceived to be) pulling the strings of government.

Many distrust the government when it is controlled by a competing party but then regain their trust when control is handed back to their own party.²⁷ When their party wins, the outcome is just; when their party loses, the other side cheated. People often view the country as being on the "right track" when their party is in control but see it headed down the "wrong track" when the opposing party holds power.²⁸ The circumstances people find themselves in affect their opinions—vis-à-vis partisanship—in other domains as well. For example, even when economic conditions are the same, the transfer of political control from one party to another leads partisans to alter their outlook, with those whose party pulls the levers of government adopting a more positive view of the economy that those whose party is out of power.²⁹

When the opposing party is in power, people's negative sentiments toward government are sometimes expressed as conspiracy theories. As if by clockwork, presidents are regularly accused by opposing partisans of being foreign agents bent on destroying the United States.³⁰ Just as Donald Trump was accused of being a Russian asset, Barack Obama was accused of secretly being a Muslim determined to undermine American interests, Jimmy Carter was accused of being a Soviet agent, and FDR was often accused of being a communist intent on taking over the

United States.³¹

Similar patterns can be found in survey questions about who people believe are most likely to be involved in conspiracies. A 2012 nationally representative US survey asked respondents, “Which of these groups are likely to work in secret against the rest of us? Check all that apply.”³² Respondents could select, from a list of ten groups, as many or as few as they liked.



Figure 5-3. The regalia worn by a member of the Freemasons, a fraternal organization.

GettyImages

Two options were groups associated with the political Right:

“Republicans or other conservative groups” and “Corporations and the rich.” Two other options were groups associated with the political Left: “Democrats or other liberal groups” and “Communists and Socialists.” Several other options, such as “Freemasons or some other fraternal groups,” were not associated with any partisan or ideological camp. Only 8 percent of Republicans expressed the belief that “Republicans and other conservative groups” were likely to work in secret against the rest of us compared to 37 percent of Democratic respondents. Only 26 percent of Republican respondents chose “Corporations and the rich” as compared to 57 percent of Democrats. As for groups aligned with the Democrat coalition, 39 percent of Republican respondents chose “Democrats and other liberal groups” but only 6 percent of Democrats did. Approximately 60 percent of Republican respondents chose “Communists and Socialists” while only 20 percent of Democratic respondents did. Altogether, partisans are more likely to accuse the opposing party and the groups associated with it of conspiring, and less likely to accuse their own party and its affiliated groups of conspiring.

A similar pattern was not observed with respect to Freemasons and other nonpartisan/ideological groups. Indeed, Republicans and Democrats were equally likely (around 10 percent each) to select “Freemasons or some other fraternal group.”³³ Compared to the partisan options, very few people expressed concern with the Freemasons. This suggests that partisan conflict is an important cause of conspiracy beliefs, at least in the United States, and that partisans are about equally likely to believe that nonpartisan groups like the Freemasons are involved in conspiracies.

How and why does partisanship affect conspiracy beliefs? We have already explored one potential explanation in the previous chapter: motivated reasoning. Here we interrogate this question from a different angle, first exploring how political attitudes are formed and then applying this information to the formation of conspiracy theories.

Opinion Formation

Following the wars of the early twentieth century, social scientists began to take a strong interest in the public’s opinions. Of central concern was why otherwise good and decent people would support

fascist regimes, some of which slaughtered millions of innocents. To answer this question, sociologist Paul Lazarsfeld and his team conducted a series of countrywide panel studies across the northeastern United States beginning in the 1930s.³⁴ By interviewing the same people repeatedly, they intended to observe how media messages influenced the audience's preferences for political candidates, entertainment, and commercial products. Lazarsfeld et al. initially assumed that messages in the media could have strong, direct, and intuitive effects on mass opinion so that, for example, advertisements for political candidates could immediately alter how people intended to vote. If messages in the media had this kind of power, then the propaganda machines employed by the Nazis and other authoritarian governments could potentially explain the public support for those regimes. The idea that media messages could have such strong and intuitive effects is sometimes referred to as *hypodermic needle theory*.

The Hypodermic Needle Theory

Lazarsfeld expected that—if the hypodermic needle theory was accurate—his team would observe an ebb and flow of public preferences closely mimicking the ebb and flow of media messages. However, they found the exact opposite: regardless of the changing media environment, voter preferences, for example, changed little in the months leading up to elections. In other words, media messages did not seem to have much power to change minds (at least directly), and people's preferences were stable over long periods despite exposure to varying media messaging.³⁵ Lacking supporting evidence, researchers put a pin in the hypodermic needle theory and continued their search for explanations of public opinion.³⁶

In 1960, researchers at the University of Michigan published an exhaustive study of American public opinion, *The American Voter*, which sought to explain the stability of individuals' political opinions over time.³⁷ In their account, people's political opinions arise from socialization processes and, once solidified, become largely impervious to external stimuli such as news and advertising. Early life influences such as parents, schooling, and religion led people to develop *partisan attachments*, which were stable not only over the course of campaigns but over the course of lifetimes. Thus,

to move partisan preferences, strong stimuli are needed, such as being subject to a military draft or similarly jarring, potentially life-altering experiences.³⁸

According to the account in *The American Voter*, partisanship shapes more specific, “downstream” opinions but is not much affected by other specific beliefs. This account has been tested repeatedly in the intervening decades, consistently standing up to scrutiny. Simply put, partisanship is best thought of as a social-psychological group attachment that colors how one sees the political world. Consider the findings of public opinion scholars Donald Green, Bradley Palmquist, and Eric Schickler, who, writing forty years after *The American Voter*, support its main conclusions:

Our view, which harkens back to earlier social-psychological perspectives on partisanship, draws a parallel between party identification and religious identification. Partisan attachments form relatively early in adulthood. . . . When people feel a sense of belonging to a given social group, they absorb the doctrinal positions that the group advocates. However party and religious identifications come about, once they take root in early adulthood, they often persist. Partisan identities are enduring features of citizens’ self-conceptions. They do not merely come and go with election cycles and campaign ephemera. The public’s interest in party politics climbs as elections draw near, but partisan self-conceptions remain intact during peaks and lulls in party competition.³⁹

Because of the stability introduced by socialization and other social-psychological processes, there is little room for media messages or other mundane stimuli to affect specific opinions the way partisanship does. The lack of evidentiary support for the hypodermic needle theory coupled with findings regarding the relative stability of partisanship over time prompted a new theory of media effects—the *minimal effects model*—that has been conventional wisdom ever since.⁴⁰

The Minimal Effects Model

The minimal effects model has two core tenets. First, audiences have an active psychological resistance to messages that challenge underlying attachments and predispositions, including and especially partisanship. Studies find that audiences either ignore or

excessively scrutinize information with which they disagree and give additional weight to information with which they agree. This leads to confirmation bias, which occurs when people gather or consider only evidence that supports a preordained conclusion.

Consider the famous study by Charles Lord, Lee Ross, and Mark Lepper, in which undergraduate students (some of whom supported capital punishment, others who opposed it) were exposed to one of two fabricated “studies” about the death penalty. One of the “studies” in the experiment confirmed the student participants’ existing beliefs about the death penalty; the other disconfirmed it. The analysis found that both “proponents and opponents of capital punishment rated those results and procedures that confirmed their own beliefs to be the more convincing and probative ones,” and as such, “the result of exposing contending factions in a social dispute to an identical body of relevant empirical evidence may be not a narrowing of disagreement but rather an increase in polarization.”⁴¹ The reason, they found, was that

people who hold strong opinions on complex social issues are likely to examine relevant empirical evidence in a biased manner. They are apt to accept “confirming” evidence at face value while subjecting “disconfirming” evidence to critical evaluation, and, as a result, draw undue support for their initial positions from mixed or random empirical findings.⁴²

Lord, Ross, and Lepper’s findings were tested some years later, but this time with information about the assassination of President Kennedy. The finding was identical:

Due to the processes of biased assimilation and attitude polarization, personal theories about the perpetrator(s) of the assassination are essentially immutable, and therefore the debate surrounding JFK’s assassination will continue endlessly . . . proponents of both the [official explanation] and conspiracy theories perceive the same body of evidence as supportive of their position . . . [which] leads to attitude polarization rather than to a moderation or reversal of existing attitudes.⁴³

People view information differently depending on what they already believe. Consequently, new information may not have as much of an effect on beliefs as some claim it does.

The second core tenet of the minimal effects model is that

audiences self-select sources of information to meet their demand for gratification and to avoid challenges to deeply held views.⁴⁴ Simply put, one cannot be influenced by—including being angered or upset by—information to which one is not exposed. When it comes to cable news channels in the United States, for example, most people are simply not watching. But those who are watching tend to select the channel that presents information in a way that is most congruent with their partisan beliefs and attachments, with Republicans watching the Fox News Channel and Democrats watching CNN or MSNBC.⁴⁵

Self-selection operates in a similar fashion when it comes to conspiracy theory content: there are of course many venues for people to seek out conspiracy theories, but those venues are mostly trafficked by those who already believe in conspiracy theories, likely because they have a worldview colored by conspiracy thinking. For example, an Italian study tracking interaction with fabricated Facebook pages touting conspiracy theories showed that positive interactions came mostly from people who had a history of interacting with popular conspiracy theories on the platform; conversely, those who have a history of interacting with science-oriented pages did not interact positively with fabricated conspiracy theories. Essentially, people who are inclined toward conspiracy theories seek them out online and interact positively with them; people who are not so inclined do not so much.⁴⁶ This suggests that much of the conspiracy theory content online preaches to the choir.

By positing these two forms of resistance—the audience's predispositions and its choices of content—the minimal effects model suggests that the media's ability to change minds is limited. News messages, therefore, primarily serve to reinforce existing opinions but not to change them. One reason why political polarization has unfolded over the course of the past half century is that people primarily seek out and consider only information that confirms what they already believe, which insulates them from reflection and compromise. This selective exposure to content that is congruent with pre-existing beliefs has been facilitated by an increase in choices of content providers who specifically target party identities and ideologies (e.g., Fox News Channel, MSNBC).⁴⁷

This is not to say that new information cannot influence people at all. It can and often does. Many studies show that news outlets can set issue priorities for audiences through a process called

*agenda setting*⁴⁸—providing audiences with a sense of which issues, out of millions, are the most important at any given time. In this sense, the media can affect what audiences think *about*, even though it cannot always successfully tell audiences what opinion to hold. Media *framing* effects are also well documented.⁴⁹ News outlets can discuss issues in many different ways (e.g., which experts to interview, which images to present), and the choices they make can greatly alter how an issue is perceived. For example, a government program to address the COVID-19 pandemic can be reported as a “public health measure,” a “controversial policy,” or a “freedom-sapping dictate.” Each of these frames refers to the same object but gives a different impression to audiences because each focuses on a different aspect of that object.⁵⁰ We note, though, that because people self-select their sources of information and then resist information that would cause cognitive dissonance, even the tangible media effects may be weaker than some suspect.⁵¹ On top of this, news outlets (and other purveyors of information) are incentivized to attract audiences; they do this by carefully targeting their product to the audience’s demands. If media outlets—be they newspapers, YouTube channels, or cable news outlets—do not bring in audiences, they cease to exist.⁵²

Political scientist John Zaller offers an important mechanism by which the media might influence audiences while accounting for the audience’s predispositions. In writing about opinion formation and information, Zaller begins with the observation that “[citizens] possess a variety of interests, values, and experiences that may greatly affect their willingness to accept—or alternatively, their resolve to resist—persuasive influence.”⁵³ He subsequently demonstrates that people tend to take cues from media and political elites whom they trust; for example, Democrats will take cues from Democrat politicians and news sources, and Republicans will take cues from Republican leaders and news sources. In this light, partisanship determines which elites (or other sources) one takes cues from, not just which opinions they come to on their own (e.g., from their personal ideologies and values).

Further, and congruent with *The American Voter*, it is the underlying dispositions (i.e., partisanship) that are “sticky,” whereas other opinions are more malleable and easily affected by *elite cues*. Consider a recent study in which constituents received flyers with issue positions from their state legislators. Scholars

found that “voters often adopted the positions legislators took, even when legislators offered little justification . . . voters did not evaluate their legislators more negatively when representatives took positions these voters had previously opposed . . . regardless of whether legislators provided justifications.”⁵⁴ The researchers concluded that their “findings are consistent with theories suggesting voters often defer to politicians’ policy judgments.”⁵⁵

As a second example, take the campaign for California’s Prop. 19 in 2010, which would have legalized marijuana had it passed. Having the caricature of a typical Democrat in mind, most people might assume that Democrats exhibited steadfast support for this proposition. Instead, when high-profile Democrats in the Obama administration came out in opposition to the proposition, many Democrat voters who had previously supported passage changed their minds. According to political scientist Michael Tesler,

Democratic voters in California were especially likely to change their support for Prop. 19 from September to October. While Republican opposition to Prop. 19 remained relatively stable, Democratic support declined by nine and seven percentage points in [polls] conducted during the final month of the campaign. Moreover . . . the drop in Prop. 19 support was particularly pronounced among the most politically interested Democrats. . . . In September 2010, 75 percent of highly-interested Democrats supported the proposition compared with just 60 percent in October. Meanwhile, support from Republicans and less informed Democrats remained rather constant.⁵⁶

Highly interested Democrats—those most likely to be exposed to cues from the high-profile Democrats opposing the proposition—were the ones most likely to change their minds on the issue.

A particularly amusing example of the power of partisan elite cues involves Herman Cain, a former CEO of Godfather’s Pizza who ran for the Republican presidential nomination in 2012. Coincidentally, YouGov’s BrandIndex was surveying the public repeatedly about Godfather’s brand favorability in 2012. It found that Republicans and Democrats viewed the pizza chain similarly when the campaign began. However, as the country learned that Cain was formerly the CEO, opinions of Godfather’s polarized: Republicans viewed the chain more positively, while Democrats viewed it more negatively. By the height of Cain’s popularity, Republicans and Democrats differed by 25 points (on a scale

ranging from -100 to 100) in their view of the pizza chain.⁵⁷ Despite the fact that Godfather's served the same pizza regardless of customers' partisan loyalties, those political loyalties strongly influenced how the brand was perceived. These forces are in play for conspiracy theories too: when political leaders transmit conspiracy theories to their trusting audiences, those trusting audiences are likely to adopt those conspiracy theories as beliefs.⁵⁸

These are the broad strokes of opinion formation and media effects. The media and other sources of information can impact attitudes, but effects are rarely as strong or drastic as many accounts, or even our own intuition, might lead us to believe. Even long, sustained information campaigns—like those taking place during US presidential elections—rarely show evidence of widespread opinion change.⁵⁹ Instead, campaigns might be better categorized as battles over *mobilization*—cajoling people into actually casting a vote (for the candidate that matches their partisanship)—more so than *persuasion*—changing others' minds about whom they should vote for.⁶⁰ Perhaps the popular concerns over persuasive media effects exist because many people believe that they are immune to such influence but that everyone else is a lemming.⁶¹

Partisanship and Conspiracy Theory Beliefs

Opposing partisans can be thought of as opposing teams in a sporting match, but where the stakes of the outcome have far greater implications. As the old saying goes, politics ain't beanbag. Like membership on a sports team, partisanship stems from a sense of belonging or group attachment, rather than from a judgment on a set of policies.⁶² Likewise, people favor their team over others and believe their team naturally possesses better intentions and ideas.

When partisans believe in conspiracy theories, those theories tend to accuse the opposing party of conspiring. Partisans, therefore, tend to believe conspiracy theories that the opposing party rejects.⁶³ Partisans additionally believe in conspiracy theories that align with their partisan worldview in other ways. Using data collected from the 1958 party conventions, political scientists Herbert McClosky and Dennis Chong compared the beliefs of Far Left and Far Right activists. They found near symmetry in the willingness of activists on each side to accuse the opposite side of

conspiring, though decidedly different reasons for making those accusations were offered:

Despite the suspicions of both the left and right towards the government, their anti-system responses are usually triggered by different issues. In responding, for example, to a series of items concerning the influence of the wealthy and powerful on the courts, the nation's laws, the newspapers and the political parties, the far left was the most willing of the ideological groups to condemn these institutions as pawns of the rich. None of this is surprising, of course, since hostility to capitalist elites and the establishment has long been a dominant feature of radical-left politics. But the radical right is also disenchanted with these institutions, though for different reasons. Its anger is detonated, not by the institutions' alleged association with wealth or "business," but by their supposed susceptibility to the influence of an entrenched liberal establishment. In their view, government offices, the press, the foundations and other powerful institutions are overflowing with technocrats and academics trained at liberal colleges and universities. These universities are also the "farm system" that stocks the judiciary and various other professions.⁶⁴

Numerous polls show that partisans are equally willing to believe in conspiracy theories. What distinguishes Democrats from Republicans, for example, is that they believe in different conspiracy theories for different reasons.⁶⁵ In this way, partisan conspiracy theories are reflective of partisan conflict.⁶⁶

Not only do group identities, like partisanship, encourage or discourage *beliefs* in particular conspiracy theories, but they also color how people perceive the quality of evidence in favor of those theories, regardless of whether they believe the theories or not. Thus, people give unwarranted credibility to evidence supporting conspiracy theories other people in their group favor; they also tend to downplay, ignore, or reject evidence that supports conspiracy theories the opposing side favors.⁶⁷ Partisans tend to be biased against the evidence for conspiracy theories believed by the other side and are likely to label those ideas as not only "conspiracy theories" but as "zany," "crazy," "irrational," and "unevidenced." At the same time, partisans tend to view the evidence for the allegations of conspiracy their side champions as at least somewhat compelling, and they avoid the "conspiracy theory" label and other pejoratives when referencing those ideas. For example, some

Democrats who rejected the conspiracy theory that Barack Obama faked his birth certificate also thought the idea that President Bush was involved in the 9/11 attacks was somewhat justified even if they did not personally adopt it as a belief. It is all the easier for partisans to engage in this practice when what counts as a conspiracy theory is dependent on some undefined and easily movable evidentiary standard based on personal biases and political circumstances.⁶⁸

Thus, the category of ideas labeled “conspiracy theory” for one who leans toward the Left, for example, will prominently feature ideas believed by Republicans, and the people who fall into the category of “conspiracy theorist” will prominently feature Republicans; the opposite will be true for those leaning toward the political Right. When confronted with the dubious nature of a conspiracy theory believed by those on their own side, people will often demur, claiming that only the far fringe of their side believes the theory or perhaps even arguing that the theory has some merit.⁶⁹ This tendency, of course, has tangible implications for our understanding of what counts as a conspiracy theory and who counts as a conspiracy theorist or conspirator.

This problem even affects the scientific study of conspiracy theories, leaving some ideas as difficult to study as “conspiracy theories” because they conflict with some scholars’ partisan and ideological identities. This is particularly troublesome when it comes to widely accepted ideas or those seen as acceptable on the Left, in particular, because many of the scholars who study conspiracy theories have Left-leaning sympathies.⁷⁰ Consider the theory—often trumpeted by Democrat senator Bernie Sanders—that the “one percent” of the richest people control the government and economy: some scholars consider this idea a conspiracy theory because it posits a conspiracy and is not accepted by a consensus of relevant experts (economists),⁷¹ but others reject such a categorization because they see the theory as true, somewhat true, or otherwise valuable.⁷² Other ideas that happen to fit all or most scholars’ personal conception of conspiracy theory (e.g., Obama faked his birth certificate) are not the subject of discord such as this and can therefore be studied without argument (we are unaware of any objections to labeling the “birther” theory as a conspiracy theory from within the academy). This distorts—to some degree—the scholarly understanding of conspiracy theories, because what

counts as a conspiracy theory is partially dependent on researchers' identities and prior beliefs.

Since people are most likely to accept the veracity of ideas that comport with their own identities and worldviews, and because conspiracy theories are colloquially marked by their perceived lack of truth-value, the "conspiracy theory" label is most likely to be selectively—and pejoratively—applied to only those ideas people find distasteful, fanciful, or just plain false.⁷³ "Conspiracy theory," as it is popularly wielded by journalists, politicians, and other opinion leaders is, in this sense, no more than an uncreative mechanism for denigrating ideas one disagrees with.

There is an additional dynamic at play. As we hinted at above, the arguments over who believes conspiracy theories the most devolve into arguments about what counts as a conspiracy theory or about which conspiracy theories are better evidenced. Therefore, when determining what is and what is not a conspiracy theory, we should be forthright with our definitions and apply them consistently. Doing so will most likely show significant conspiracy theorizing on both sides of the partisan aisle.⁷⁴

When the research into conspiracy theories began in earnest around 2007, it was clear that many of our colleagues had focused their work rather narrowly, on conspiracy theories believed by Republicans, but seemed blind to conspiracy theories on the Left:

Since the beginning, that is since Richard Hofstadter, the claim has been that there is partisan asymmetry because the right is more authoritarian, anti-intellectual, and tribal. Although there are differences between the Left and Right, scholars and the media should be circumspect about over-drawing them in this instance. We believe the notion of asymmetry has persisted because academics and journalists align largely with the Left. This pushes these two institutions to disproportionately dwell on conspiracy theories held by the right but overlook conspiracy theories closer to home. Hofstadter himself was a leftist with Marxist sympathies—it is perfectly understandable why he picked up a pen in the wake of the Red Scare. When we presented [our research] on an academic conference panel in 2013, the other academics presented papers addressing the theories that Obama was born in a foreign country, was a secret Muslim, and that he faked Bureau of Labor Statistics data. All are valuable contributions, but the audience could be forgiven for thinking Republicans were more susceptible to conspiracy theories than Democrats. In political science at least,

much of the recent study of conspiratorial beliefs has defended accusations against actors on the left, especially since Obama's election in 2008. Searching through the conference archives of the American Political Science Association (2002–2013) and Midwest Political Science Association (2004–2013), we found many papers studying conspiratorial beliefs on the right and nearly none on the left. The cumulative effect is that our knowledge generating and knowledge disseminating institutions make the right look chock full of cranks and the left look sensible and savvy. There is no conspiracy here; ideology drives the worldviews of professors and journalists just like it does everyone else. But that does not make it just.⁷⁵

While this has changed drastically during the last few years, there still remains a tendency for scholars and journalists to focus on theories believed by the Right and to assume that Republicans are particularly prone to conspiracy beliefs.

Symmetry

Some research finds that those on the political Right exhibit a stronger propensity toward conspiracism than those on the Left. Most of these studies focus on a small number of beliefs in particular conspiracy theories, some of which even accuse Democrats and liberals of conspiring. This is not a particularly even-handed approach to deciphering asymmetries in the partisan and ideological foundations of conspiracy beliefs.

In [Figure 5-4](#), we present the proportion of self-identified Republicans (white bars) and Democrats (black bars) believing in each of fifty-two different conspiracy theories (see the [appendix](#) for precise question wording).⁷⁶ These theories vary in salience (i.e., how relevant they are to contemporary culture), topic (e.g., science and technology, government malfeasance), and, most importantly, accused conspirators (e.g., Democrats, Republicans, scientists). Toward the top of [Figure 5-4](#), we observe many conspiracy theories that garner much more support from Republicans than Democrats, such as those about global warming, the Birther theory, the Mueller investigation, and the activities of Democrat philanthropist George Soros. Toward the bottom of the figure, we observe just as many conspiracy theories that garner much more support from Democrats than Republicans, such as those involving Donald Trump and his ties to Russia, election fraud, and the Koch brothers. This is one

sense in which there appears to be partisan and ideological symmetry in conspiracy beliefs: both sides believe in conspiracy theories, albeit different ones.

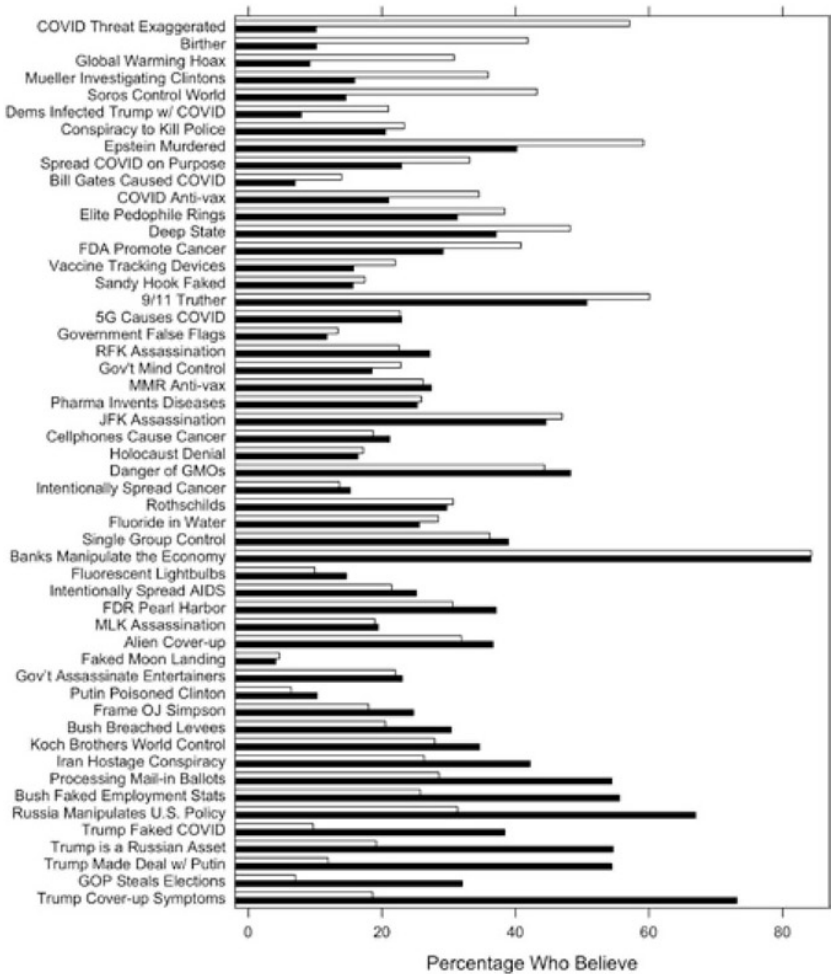


Figure 5-4. Proportion of Democrats (black) and Republicans (white) believing in each of 52 different conspiracy theories. Many sources; see [appendix](#) for details.

Another form of partisan and ideological symmetry can be found in the middle of the figure. Indeed, many conspiracy theories do not find more support among Democrats or Republicans, liberals or conservatives—they are nonpartisan/ideology. For example, an

approximately equal proportion of Democrats and Republicans believe in a broader conspiracy behind the assassination of JFK, that Big Pharma invents diseases, and that the Rothschilds are in control of the global economy. We would not expect to observe a pattern such as this if one side was inherently more likely to believe in conspiracy theories than the other. Moreover, studies have shown that when the content of conspiracy theories are controlled for—that is, the same conspiracy theories are presented to the Right and Left save for whether villains on the Right or the Left are accused—both sides exhibit about the same level of belief.

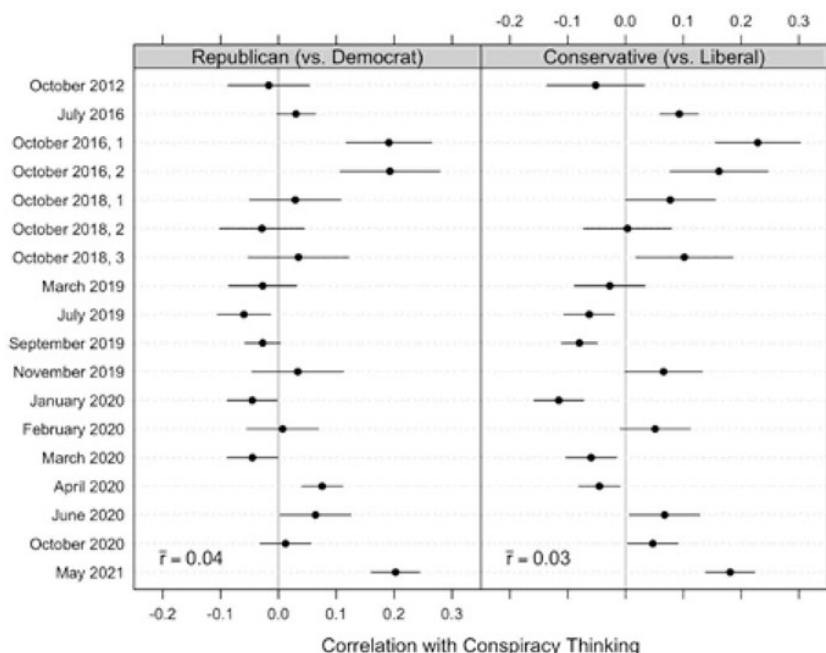


Figure 5-5. Correlation between conspiracy thinking and both partisan and ideological identities over time. Horizontal bars represent 95 percent confidence intervals.

Source: All datasets (see [appendix](#) for details).

Yet another way to interrogate the question of partisan and ideological asymmetry is to examine differences in conspiracy thinking, which avoids the trappings (and noncomparability) of specific conspiracy theories. To quickly review, conspiracy thinking is the degree to which one views events and circumstance as the

product of conspiracies.⁷⁷ Conspiracy thinking exists along a continuum, with extremely conspiracy-minded (those believing that conspiracies are responsible for nearly everything) on one end, and the extremely non-conspiracy-minded (those believing conspiracies are responsible for nearly nothing) on the other. Most Americans are somewhere in between. And both extremes are problematic in their own way. Just as people exhibiting high levels are more likely to believe in dubious ideas, those exhibiting low levels are likely to reject the existence of real conspiracies and, perhaps, to be unhealthily unsuspicious of authority figures.⁷⁸

In Figure 5-5, we present the correlations between conspiracy thinking and both partisan and ideological identities across a span of ten years.⁷⁹ When correlations are greater than 0, Republicans and conservatives exhibit greater levels of conspiracy thinking than Democrats and liberals; when correlations are negative, the opposite is true. Correlations of or near 0 reflect a lack of partisan or ideological differences in conspiracy thinking. As Figure 5-5 shows, correlations fluctuate between positive and negative over time, though most are quite weak in magnitude (i.e., close to 0). In other words, there does not appear to be a systematic relationship between partisanship or ideology when it comes to the general tendency to see the world in conspiratorial terms.

The Interaction between Partisanship and Conspiracy Thinking

Partisan attachments are a strong predictor of *which* conspiracy theories one might believe in, but not all partisans believe in conspiracy theories. Not every Republican believes that President Obama is a secret Muslim or faked his birth certificate, and not every Democrat believes that President George W. Bush stole the 2000 election, faked the 9/11 attacks, or went to war in Iraq for oil. Individual levels of conspiracy thinking within partisan groups explains why.

When people exhibiting high levels of conspiracy thinking receive information that an event may have been the product of a conspiracy perpetrated by a disliked party, they will likely concur with that conspiracy theory.⁸⁰ A person possessing a weaker tendency toward conspiracy thinking will be harder to convince.⁸¹ In other words, conspiracy thinking and partisanship interact—

depending on whether one is a Democrat or a Republican, high or low in conspiracy thinking, they may or may not be likely to believe in a particular partisan conspiracy theory.

We present evidence for this pattern in [Figure 5-6](#). Panel A depicts the percentage of Republicans—who exhibit different levels of conspiracy thinking—expressing agreement that “Barack Obama faked his citizenship to become president.” At the lowest level of conspiracy thinking, only about 13 percent of Republicans agreed. At middling levels of conspiracy thinking, however, this percentage more than doubles to 30 percent. Among those exhibiting the highest levels of conspiracy thinking (not many individuals, mind you), 57 percent believe the Birther theory. A nearly identical pattern emerges among Democrats who were asked whether or not they agreed that “Republicans won the presidential elections in 2016, 2004, and 2000 by stealing them.” The percentage of believers increases from 13 to 22 to 44 moving from low, to middling, to high levels of conspiracy thinking.

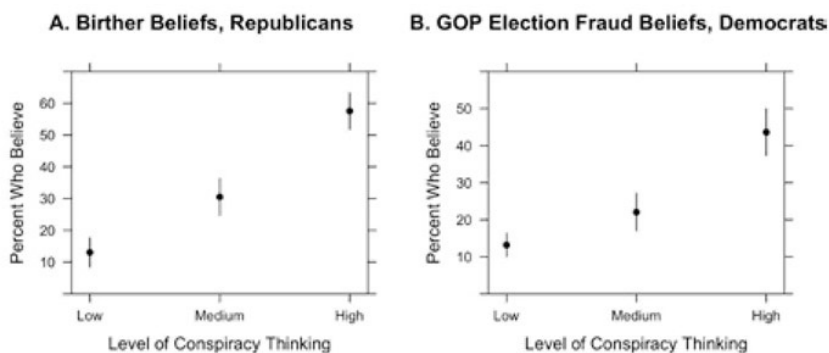


Figure 5-6. A) Percentage of Republicans at different levels of conspiracy thinking who believe in the birther conspiracy theory. B) Percentage of Democrats at different levels of conspiracy thinking who believe Republicans fraudulently steal elections. Vertical bars are 95 percent confidence intervals.

Source: May 2021 Qualtrics (see [appendix](#)).

Many journalists offhandedly refer to partisan conspiracy theories as Far Right or Far Left. But this is an imprecise way to think about partisan conspiracy beliefs. Conspiracy beliefs are driven primarily by conspiracy thinking, which is distinct from partisanship (indeed, the two are uncorrelated, as we mentioned

above and discuss at greater length in [chapter 6](#)). Partisanship might determine *which* partisan conspiracy theories one is relatively likely to believe in (i.e., the menu of reasonable options), but conspiracy beliefs are not necessarily dependent upon the strength of an individual's partisan attachments. Self-identifying independents may even believe in more conspiracy theories—a mix of partisan (regarding both parties) and nonpartisan ones—than their partisan counterparts do.⁸² And while a large segment of the US population is strongly disposed toward believing conspiracy theories (about half), that partisan conspiracy theories are likely to convince only one side of the partisan divide suggests there is a rough ceiling on belief in such theories of about 25 percent. For example, the Birther theory never garnered support among more than about 25 percent of Americans.⁸³

Only in rare cases will a conspiracy theory appeal to a majority of the country in a bipartisan fashion. As discussed in [chapter 3](#), Kennedy assassination theories are among the most prominent. Upwards of 80 percent of Americans have believed in one form of this theory or another because the majority of survey questions do not present respondents with partisan cues (e.g., “Do you believe that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone in killing President Kennedy, or was there some larger conspiracy at work?”⁸⁴). Americans of any partisan persuasion can respond affirmatively to this question because it does not pin blame on an actor from either team. Of course, when pollsters ask a follow-up question about who was behind the assassination, answers vary greatly.⁸⁵ Kennedy was also president in a time of very low partisan polarization; indeed, the American Political Science Association even famously authored a report several years before about how the parties were not sufficiently distinct from each other to present the American people with meaningfully different options.⁸⁶ Moreover, Kennedy theories have seeped into mainstream discourse in a way that most conspiracy theories do not.⁸⁷ There are numerous movies, television shows, and books that call the Warren Commission findings into question. The anniversary of Kennedy's assassination each year seems to focus as much on the conspiracy theories as on anything else. Altogether, conspiracy theories can gain majority support, but only if they are general enough to appeal to nearly everyone disposed to believing conspiracy theories.

Conspiracy Theories Are for Losers

Conspiracy beliefs are largely determined by one's level of conspiracy thinking and by one's other attachments. Because underlying dispositions are generally stable, we should expect that the salience of conspiracy theories in the public sphere would be stable over time. But this does not appear to be the case: conspiracy theories come and go. The explanation for variability over time lies not in the dispositions that underlie conspiracy beliefs but rather in situations that might encourage them. Most importantly, conspiracy theories are more likely to resonate in American society when they are used by out-of-power groups to attack in-power groups. This was summarized by Uscinski and Parent:

We argue the targets and timing of resonant conspiracy theories follow a strategic logic, based on foreign threat and domestic power. In this way, conspiracy theories are used by vulnerable groups to manage perceived dangers: they are early warning systems that keep watch over the most sensitive areas and prepare solutions to potential attacks. At bottom, conspiracy theories are a form of threat perception, and fears are fundamentally driven by shifts in relative power. Because defeat and exclusion are their biggest inducements, *conspiracy theories are for losers*.⁸⁸

This claim is based on two key empirical observations. First, electoral losers tend to feel aggrieved after their side loses an election, often resorting to conspiracy theories to account for their loss. In this way, believing in and sharing conspiracy theories provides “a way for groups falling in the pecking order to revamp and recoup from losses, close ranks, staunch losses, overcome collective action problems, and sensitize minds to vulnerabilities.”⁸⁹ Rather than accept responsibility for their defeat, or to give credit to the winning side, it is easier for some to blame their loss on trickery. Polls consistently show this effect:

After Mitt Romney's defeat in 2012, 49 percent of Republicans believed that the Democrat-leaning activist group, ACORN, had stolen the election for Barack Obama (only 6 percent of Democrats believed this). It did not matter much that ACORN no longer existed in 2012. Such numbers could give the impression that Republicans are prone to belief in election fraud; however, instances where Democrats lose elections show parity. Following the contentious presidential election of 2000, 31 percent of Democrats believed that

George W. Bush had stolen the election (only 3 percent of Republicans agreed), and 30 percent of Democrats stated that they would not accept George W. Bush as a legitimate president. . . . To further demonstrate how both parties explain losses with accusations of fraud, a 2013 national poll asked respondents about fraud in the 2004 and 2008 elections. A total of 37 percent of Democrats believed the statement, “President Bush’s supporters committed significant voter fraud in order to win Ohio in 2004,” was probably true, while only 9 percent of Republicans agreed. This reverses in a question about President Obama’s victory in 2012: 36 percent of Republicans believed it was probably true that “President Obama’s supporters committed significant voter fraud in the 2012 presidential election,” while only 4 percent of Democrats agreed. Significant portions of both parties cry foul after they lose, and in near equal numbers. Thus, the public’s opinions stand in stark contrast to a scholarly consensus that election fraud is negligible, and suggest that opinions about fraud depend heavily on situational factors.⁹⁰

In the lead-up to Election Day, Americans on both sides of the political aisle are equally suspicious that the other side will cheat in order to win; after the winner is announced, however, conspiracy theories alleging fraud are largely confined to the losing side.

A second observation supporting the “losers” argument comes from a study of letters to the editor of the *New York Times*. This analysis involved reading 120,000 letters to the editor of the *New York Times* from 1890 to 2010 (a random sample of about 1,000 letters per year). The letters that advocated or refuted a conspiracy theory were examined, with a particular eye toward who was being accused of conspiring. The findings showed that the groups accused of conspiring ebbed and flowed over time, depending on who held power and when. The proportion of conspiracy theory letters each year accusing the party occupying the White House of conspiring was higher than the proportion of letters accusing out-of-power groups.

During Republican administrations, conspiracy theories targeting the Right and capitalists average 34 percent, while conspiracy theories targeting the Left and communists average only 11 percent. During Democratic administrations, *mutatis mutandis*, conspiracy theories aimed at the Right and capitalists drop 25 points to 9 percent while conspiracy theories aimed at the Left and communists more than double to 27 percent. Who controls the White House invites conspiracy theories. For illustrations, compare consecutive years

when executive power changes party. In 1968, Democrat Lyndon Johnson was president and accusations against the Left and communists were 17 percent of total conspiracy talk while accusations against the Right and capitalists were zero. Republican Richard Nixon won the 1968 presidential election and took office in January 1969. That year accusations of conspiracy against the Left and communists dropped from 17 percent to zero percent while accusations against the Right and capitalists increased from zero to 25 percent. A similar pattern crops up after the 2008 presidential election. When Barack Obama took office from George W. Bush, accusations against the Right and capitalists dropped by 40 percentage points while accusations against the Left and communists increased by 10 percentage points between 2008 and 2009.⁹¹

The letters-to-the-editor data are illustrative of a broader pattern in American politics. During the Clinton administration, prominent conspiracy theories focused on Clinton's real estate dealings, the death of White House attorney Vince Foster, and the cover-up of sexual harassment and other illegalities. When George W. Bush came to power, these conspiracy theories became inert. The prominent conspiracy theories then villainized George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, Halliburton, Blackwater, and other members of the Republican coalition. Many of these theories suggested that 9/11 was an inside job or that the country went to war in Iraq for oil. As soon as Barack Obama won the presidency, these conspiracy theories became politically sterile, and newly salient conspiracy theories addressed Obama's citizenship and his ties to Muslim and communist extremists.⁹² When Donald Trump unexpectedly won the 2016 presidential election, popular conspiracy theories alleged that he conspired with Russia to rig the outcome, was a long-time Soviet agent, and was compromised by embarrassing tapes of his (alleged) illicit activities with prostitutes. Fears centering on Obama subsided once Republicans controlled the House, Senate, and White House. Democrats' lowly status made them feel anxious and powerless, and therefore prone to conspiracy theorizing.

Shifts in domestic power are not the only driver of conspiracy theorizing. Foreign threat and major wars exert a significant influence on Americans' willingness to openly conspiracy theorize about foreigners and foreign powers. For example, during years of acute threat (e.g., declared wars and the Cold War) the proportion of foreign conspiracy theories in the letters-to-the-editor data increases by an average of 17 percentage points, from 28 to 45

percent. As outside dangers loom large, conspiracy theorists focus their attention away from domestic threats and more toward outside threats.⁹³

None of this is to say that beliefs will change with shifts in power; rather, the point is that losers will be more concerned with their perceived enemies when those enemies have power. This leads to conspiracy theories emanating from the out-party taking precedence over conspiracy theories emanating from the in-party, because “defeated subgroups have strong incentives to be especially vigilant and vigorous.”⁹⁴ The incentives ride on partisans’ backs and influence them subconsciously. To resonate widely, conspiracy theories must conform to the present distribution of power; this appears to be so whether partisans realize it or not. Consider the Clinton administration’s claim that “a vast right-wing conspiracy” was the source of President Clinton’s troubles, or President Obama’s claim that he was the victim of shadowy billionaires: neither of these conspiracy theories resonated well (the former became a ’90s punchline).⁹⁵

The *conspiracy theories are for losers* argument was illustrated quite well, albeit accidentally, by Nobel Prize-winning economist and left-leaning *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman. During the Bush administration, Krugman argued in favor of conspiracy theories, likely because his side was out of power: “For the last few years, the term ‘conspiracy theory’ has been used primarily to belittle anyone suggesting that the Bush administration used 9/11 as an excuse to fight an unrelated war in Iraq. The truth is that many of the people who throw around terms like ‘loopy conspiracy theories’ are lazy bullies, they try to suggest that anyone who asks those questions is crazy.”⁹⁶ When power switched hands and Democrats were back in power, Krugman was less enthused by conspiracy theories (since the most prominent conspiracy theories were accusing his side of conspiring). He sought to wash his side’s hands of them: “Conspiracy theories are supported by a lot of influential people on the right, but not on the left.”⁹⁷ When Donald Trump won the presidential election in 2016, Krugman again resorted to conspiracy theories to explain his side’s faltering status: “It looks more and more as if we had an election swung, in effect, by a faction of our own security sector in alliance with Putin.”⁹⁸ Of course, this claim has never been substantiated. Circumstances affect how people view the world and whether they actively engage

in conspiracy theorizing or not. If this applies to a highly educated Nobel Prize winner, it applies to everyone.

Conclusion

Conspiracy theories address the use and abuse of power. For that reason, conspiracy theories are political opinions that can be understood much like other political opinions (e.g., about political issues). An individual's political predispositions—especially partisanship and ideology—can help explain which partisan/ideological conspiracy theories they are likely to believe in. Relative changes in power and threat lead some conspiracy theories to become more salient in public discourse than others. Conspiracy theories accusing those in power resonate far better than those accusing those who are out of power.

Discussion Questions

1. Which partisan conspiracy theories do you think members of different political parties—ones you do not associate with—believe in? Do you believe in any conspiracy theories that involve political parties or elected leaders?
2. Say there was a conspiracy theory spreading online that the White House recently released a plan to give tax credits to people who buy solar panels for their homes because the panels were outfitted with satellite technology that allowed the administration to create a map of everyone's whereabouts and movements. Who do you think would be most likely to believe in this conspiracy theory, and why?
3. Do you think there is a connection between partisan conspiracy theories and either polarization or political violence? How? In what way?

Key Terms and Concepts

Agenda Setting

Anti-Elitism

Anti-Intellectualism

Bilderbergers

Deep State

Elite Cues
Elites
False Flag Event
Framing
Freemasons
Hypodermic Needle Theory
Ideology
Manicheanism
Minimal Effects Model
Mobilization
Partisan Attachments
Partisanship
Populism
Power
Skull & Bones Society
Socialization

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Donald Trump and the Elections of 2016 and 2020

The 2016 US presidential election differed from previous recent presidential elections in numerous ways. Perhaps the most important way, as far as this book is concerned at least, was the presence of conspiracy theories, especially in candidate messaging on the campaign trail. Donald Trump, for example, accused Hillary Clinton and others of attempting to rig the election. He even went so far as to suggest that Senator Ted Cruz’s father had played a role in the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963. These and other conspiracy theories meshed well with Trump’s overall message that Washington, DC, was a corrupt “swamp” that only an outsider—like him—could restore. Hillary Clinton also spoke *about* conspiracy theories, even though she did not engage in conspiracy theorizing the way Trump did. For example, Clinton argued that, because Trump had “built his campaign on prejudice and paranoia . . . taking hate groups mainstream and helping a radical fringe take over the Republican Party” and trafficked in “dark conspiracy

theories drawn from the pages of supermarket tabloids and the far reaches of the Internet,” he “should never run our government or command our military.”¹ The result of the 2016 election is well known: Trump defeated Clinton in the Electoral College to win the presidency. Trump’s loss of the popular vote prompted him to claim that it had been rigged; Clinton’s loss of the presidency, combined with revelations of a Russian disinformation campaign in the run-up to the election, led her to eventually claim that Trump was an illegitimate president.² Altogether, allegations of conspiracy abounded.

Trump’s presidency was tumultuous (to say the least), as might be expected given that he was an inexperienced outsider who fractured his own party. Perhaps the most focal cause of tumult was his suspected involvement with Russia during the 2016 campaign. In reaction to multiple ongoing investigations and nonstop news coverage of the Trump campaign’s links to Russian agents, many Americans, particularly those on the political Left, believed that Trump was a Russian agent, that he was being blackmailed by Russia, or that he had made a corrupt bargain with the Russian government. The most prominent investigation into Trump’s contacts with Russia—the Mueller investigation—failed to produce conclusive evidence that Trump was directing or at least involved in Russia’s disinformation campaign. The COVID-19 pandemic then wreaked havoc on our lives and, most certainly, our politics. The many investigations into Trump, his impeachment by the House of Representatives in 2019, and the pandemic allowed Trump to claim that he was a victim of shadowy forces, despite holding the most powerful office in the world. In other words, these situational factors surrounding Trump’s presidency allowed him to deploy conspiracy theories, at least among his supporters, with a certain credibility that other recent presidents have not possessed.

The 2020 election pitted Trump against Joe Biden, who, like Hillary Clinton, used far less conspiratorial rhetoric in his campaign compared to Trump. Trump and his campaign engaged in a concerted effort to prime Americans to believe that the election was being rigged; this effort continued well after the revelation of the official results, utilizing the media, courts, and so-called experts in election law, election administration, and computer science in an attempt to prove foul play. Courts rejected all of the lawsuits filed in relation to election fraud—not a single one proceeded through

the judicial process. Legal defeats failed to deter Trump or his closest allies. On January 6, 2021, tensions boiled over as thousands of Trump supporters marched from the president's "Save America" rally to the Capitol building, instigating a riot and breaching the Capitol when Congress was certifying the election result.

This chapter explores the role of conspiracism during the Trump era, including the specific conspiracy theories that became popular or influential during this time period. The concept of "conspiracy theory politics" is subsequently employed to explain candidates' strategic use of conspiracy theories in their campaign rhetoric. Finally, we address the potential consequences of conspiracy theory politics.

Donald Trump Runs for President

When Donald Trump entered the race for the Republican nomination for president, he lacked the two qualities that most high-profile Republican presidential candidates possess: formal political or governmental experience and a conservative track record. While Trump enjoyed widespread name recognition due to his celebrity status, his primary foray into politics prior to his run for president involved accusing President Obama of having faked his birth certificate to illegally usurp the presidency. Trump's rhetoric on the campaign trail was widely criticized as racist, sexist, and xenophobic; but perhaps more than these disturbing elements, Trump was criticized for engaging with many conspiracy theories.³

Among the many conspiracy theories Trump repeated on the 2016 campaign trail were claims that Syrian refugees were ISIS operatives, that Mexico was sending murderers and rapists to attack Americans, and that President Obama was secretly aligned with Muslim terrorists.⁴ These conspiracy theories are particularly dangerous because they scapegoat vulnerable populations, leaving them open to attack by those who would act on those theories. Outlandish claims such as these would have disqualified any other candidate, but Trump's endorsement of conspiracy theories never appeared to endanger his electoral prospects. Throughout the bulk of the campaign, Trump claimed that the election would be rigged against him.⁵ Even months after his unlikely victory, he continued to assert that the election had been sullied by millions of illegal voters.⁶ Trump continued the use of this narrative throughout his

time in office and afterward.

Trump's success with conspiracy theories exemplifies *conspiracy theory politics*.⁷ This style of political rhetoric undermines dominant institutions and modes of thinking and is most effectively used by outsiders or those out of power, because it makes the political playing field less biased in favor of insiders. As political scientists Matthew Atkinson and Darin DeWitt explain,

Trump, as a disruptive candidate, could not compete on the party establishment's playing field. Trump had never held office and espoused policy views that transcended the mainstream party alignment. He was not the preferred candidate of Republican elites, and he received relatively few endorsements. To be successful, he's had to construct a rhetorical style that mobilized support outside of the party's mainstream.

Trump's solution is what we call "conspiracy theory politics." High-profile politicians who advocate conspiracy theories are typically jeered by the mainstream media and the party establishments. But Trump was not interested in the conventional path to power. Instead, he used conspiracy theories to practice the politics of disruption, and succeeded in building a coalition of support among myriad unconventional ideological groups located outside the traditional political party networks.

Trump's use of conspiracy theory politics proved to be a particularly ingenious form of populism. By focusing his populist appeals on conspiracy rhetoric—rather than substantive policy—Trump galvanized the broad support needed to overcome the party establishment. His conspiracy rhetoric boiled down to a single unifying claim: Political elites have abandoned the interests of regular Americans in favor of foreign interests. For Trump, the political system was corrupt and the establishment could not be trusted. It followed, then, that only a disruptor could stop the corruption.

Trump's conspiracy theories delivered an unconventional political appeal that effectively engaged groups outside of the party's mainstream. By using conspiracy theories, Trump succeeded in mobilizing a group of people for whom his utter lack of knowledge and experience was a virtue and for whom Jeb Bush's experience and party support were viewed as defects.⁸

Trump's use of conspiracy theories ingratiated him to conspiracy-minded Republicans—that is, Republicans who would not be excited about establishment candidates but would be enthused by an antiestablishment outsider. Polls taken during the 2016

primaries support this contention, showing that Republicans who supported Trump as opposed to other, more mainstream Republican candidates were more likely to believe in various conspiracy theories.⁹

To further explore how conspiracy theory politics works, consider the debate over climate change. The evidence in favor of anthropogenic climate change has only strengthened since it was first brought to the public's attention in the 1980s. Today, about 97 percent of climate scientists agree that the climate is changing due to human activity.¹⁰

Climate change conspiracy theorists originally argued that there was no scientific agreement on climate change. When confronted with the overwhelming scientific consensus (close to 100 percent of climate scientists and close to 100 percent of peer-reviewed literature), they changed tactics, instead asserting that the consensus were faked.¹¹ When studies showed a strong connection between climate change denialism and conspiracy thinking, climate change deniers claimed that those studies were faked too!¹² Over time, the climate-change-denying conspiracy theories have expanded in scope, accusing more supposed conspirators (e.g., scientists, government officials, media), therefore becoming increasingly implausible.

Conspiracy theories were the only tool available to the deniers, who did not have different or more appropriate scientific methods, data, or actual scientists on their side to make their case. Conspiracy theories were able to change the rhetorical playing field in favor of climate change deniers: The debate shifted from "What should we do about climate change?" to "Are the scientists party to a hoax?" The conspiracy theories put climate scientists on the defensive by forcing them to spend time and effort answering charges of conspiracy instead of developing new solutions to the climate crisis.¹³

Conspiracy theory politics can also be useful for individuals who are under attack. Consider the charges of sexual harassment against former Fox News host Bill O'Reilly or the charges of sexual misconduct against former Alabama Senate candidate Roy Moore. To fight back against the accusations, each claimed that the charges against them were part of a conspiracy.¹⁴ The tactic is meant to shift the debate away from the allegations and toward some larger agenda that their accusers are supposedly attempting to accomplish.

Trump was not the only candidate in 2016 to make conspiracy theories a fixture of a campaign. Bernie Sanders used the word “rigged” frequently to describe American economics and politics, and his campaign cried foul when he lost contests.¹⁵ Like Trump, Sanders appeared to be chasing the votes of people who were not only Democrats but who also had severe misgivings about the political system as a whole. While both candidates in the 2016 primaries received 40 percent of their respective party’s primary votes, Trump was able to triumph because twenty other Republican candidates split the remaining votes. In 2016, Sanders effectively had only one competitor, Hillary Clinton; in 2020, the Democratic field cleared fairly quickly in order to concentrate the non-Sanders vote for Joe Biden, the candidate that most Democrats perceived as being most able to defeat Donald Trump.

Conspiracy theory politics is hardly an American phenomenon. We can see it in the “Brexit” vote (to leave the European Union) as well, for example. Dozens of conspiracy theories were used to motivate “Leave” voters (e.g., that the true number of immigrants was being hidden); thus, it is no surprise that Britons who voted to leave the EU were more likely to believe in conspiracy theories than those who voted to stay.¹⁶ At the same time, Brexit appealed not only to members of the Conservative Party but also to the members of the Labour Party who had misgivings about Brussels.



Figure 6-1. “Brexit” refers to a referendum vote in the United Kingdom to leave the European Union, June 2016.
GettyImages

Antiestablishment Orientations

Much of the scholarly literature attempting to describe or explain American politics focuses heavily on the role of partisan elites, in particular how mainstream partisan elites affect the masses’ preferences by “cueing” the public through the mass media. For example, if Republican leaders wanted to increase support for a policy, they might make an appearance on a conservative news program and share those preferences with Republicans in the mass public, some of whom would subsequently adjust their policy preferences in the same direction. This form of *top-down leadership* explains much about US opinion and elections: people in the mass public who have attachments to parties and/or some semblance of conservative or liberal ideology take cues—usually subconsciously—from like-minded leaders in government and media.

Top-down leadership explains why attentive partisans in the mass public adopt many of the issue positions that they do. However, there are many opinions that are popular among the public that are not typically transmitted by mainstream party elites—and top-down opinion leadership cannot explain these beliefs. For example, many people harbor an antagonistic orientation toward the government, other social and political institutions, and “the system” as a whole. We call these sentiments *antiestablishment*. It would seem strange to attribute such sentiments to mainstream leaders, attachments to mainstream parties, and mainstream ideologies, because these things are themselves borne of and reflective of the establishment. Conspiracy theories are often an expression of precisely these antiestablishment sentiments.

Given that Left-Right orientations such as partisanship and liberal-conservative ideology cannot on their own explain these antiestablishment sentiments, scholars have slowly begun to focus more on orientations beyond traditional partisanship and Left-Right ideologies. These include conspiracy thinking, populism, and Manichean thinking, each of which have an antiestablishment flair. For example, both conspiracy thinking and populist sentiment share a disdain for those with power; conspiracy thinking is concerned

with powerful conspirators (often in government), while populism is concerned with powerful political elites. Both conspiracy thinking and populist sentiment foster an “us” versus “them” dynamic—we the people who are the victims of the powerful—and both employ Manichean narratives whereby the people are “good” and the elites are “evil.” Conspiracy thinking, populism, and Manichean thinking are, therefore, united in their critique of and hostility toward the established political order. We might expect, then, that conspiracy thinking, populism, and Manichean thinking are found to be closely connected when they are asked about in polls.¹⁷

We provide examples of conspiratorial (questions 1 through 4), populist (questions 5 through 13), and Manichean (question 14) attitudes—antiestablishment attitudes when taken together—in [Table 6.1](#). Because we have discussed conspiracy thinking previously, we will focus on populist and Manichean sentiments. Seventy percent or more of Americans agree that “politicians should follow only the will of the people,” “politicians always end up agreeing when it comes to protecting their privileges,” “elected officials talk too much and take too little action,” and that “the established elite and politicians have often betrayed the people.” In other words, Americans view politicians as self-serving, untrustworthy blowhards who should pay more attention to their constituents. Moreover, 46 percent of Americans believe that “politics is a battle between good and evil.” This figure showcases that the mass public does not take political actions and

Table 6.1. Antiestablishment Sentiments among the American Mass Public

Question	Percent Agree
1. Much of our lives are being controlled by plots hatched in secret places.	31
2. Even though we live in a democracy, a few people will always run things anyway.	63
3. The people who really “run” the country are not known to the voters.	44
4. Big events like wars, the current recession, and the	30

outcomes of elections are controlled by small groups of people who are working in secret against the rest of us.

5. Politicians always end up agreeing when it comes to protecting their privileges.	72
6. Politicians should follow only the will of the people.	70
7. The people, not politicians, should make our most important policy decisions.	63
8. The political differences between the elite and the people are much larger than the differences among the people.	66
9. I would rather be represented by a citizen than by a profession politician.	62
10. Elected officials talk too much and take too little action.	80
11. What people call “compromise” in politics is really just selling out on one’s principles.	51
12. Established politicians who claim to defend our interests only take care of themselves.	67
13. The established elite and politicians have often betrayed the people.	75
14. Politics is a battle between good and evil.	46

Source: October 2020 Qualtrics survey (see [appendix](#) for details).

Note: Data represent percentage of US adults who “agree” or “strongly agree.”

outcomes lightly, despite relatively low levels of knowledge about politics—lazy, selfish elites are not merely unappealing or less than ideal, they are evil.

Antiestablishment sentiments such as these are often more than just the benign complaints of a disengaged public. Indeed,

antiestablishment sentiments are related to antisocial personality traits (such as narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy), dogmatism, anomie, and distrust in government, police, and one's neighbors. They are also related to behaviors, such as support for the use of political violence, sharing information known to be false online, and being argumentative.

Despite the visibility of antiestablishment sentiments in modern political culture, historical accounts suggest they have long underwritten public opinion.¹⁸ Richard Hofstadter, when developing his notion of the “paranoid style” in the 1950s and 1960s, focused on “heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy” among the public.¹⁹ At the same time, political scientist Robert Lane argued that alienation is an important element of American political ideology; for example, the feeling that the “government is ‘not my government’” was widely shared among the public. Even foundational texts that focus on mainstream parties and partisanship, such as *The American Voter*, detailed antiestablishment sentiments as a “posture toward the ongoing political process,” a nonideological “political style,” or a form of “protest” against the establishment.²⁰ Across these accounts, antiestablishment orientations are conceived of as distinct from Left-Right partisan and ideological orientations and are most prominent among those whose opinions and behaviors cannot be adequately explained by the unidimensional, Left-Right conceptualization of mass opinion. In other words, anti-establishment sentiments have been found among people from across the partisan/ideological spectrum.²¹

While it may not come as a shock that antiestablishment sentiments are sometimes expressed by politicians, this kind of rhetoric and opinion is far from benign. Although politicians only rarely attempt to affect the ruling establishment by attacking it, antiestablishment sentiments can be activated on a large enough scale to disrupt politics.²² Further, antiestablishment rhetoric has the ability to breed distrust in institutions, alienate citizens from politics, and popularize destructive narratives and the politicians who traffic in them.

How do antiestablishment orientations come to affect politics if they exist outside the established political order? [Figure 6-2](#) showcases a conceptual model of the mass opinion space. The horizontal dimension is defined by Left-Right orientations, including partisan (Republican/Democrat) and ideological

(conservative-liberal) identities, as well as affective orientations toward Left-Right political objects (e.g., the candidates). This horizontal dimension represents traditional establishment politics and conflict. The vertical dimension represents antiestablishment orientations, which are guided by conspiracy thinking, populism, and Manichean thinking. This vertical dimension is orthogonal to, or uncorrelated with, the horizontal dimension. Neither dimension in Figure 6-2 is more important than the other; both are necessary for explaining individuals' political attitudes and identities.²³

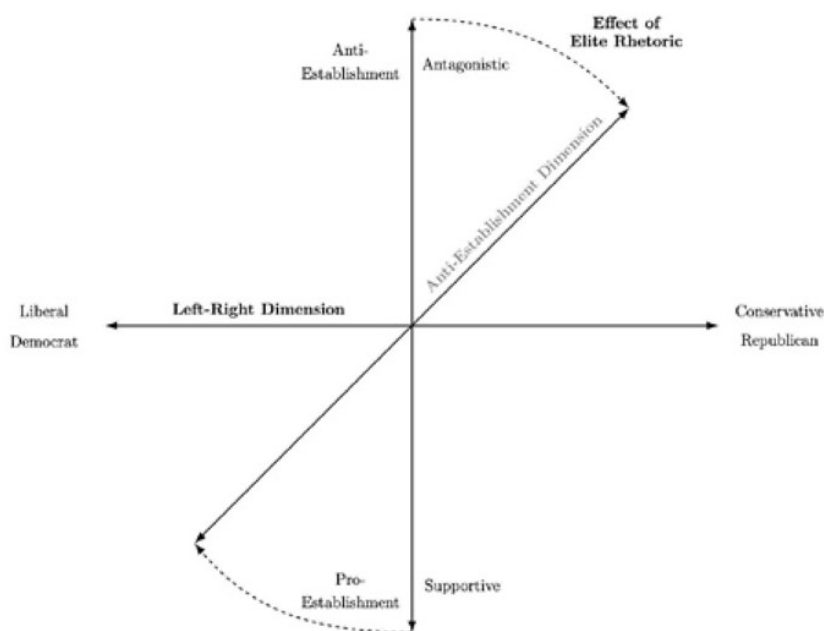


Figure 6-2. Conceptual model of the relationship between the Left-Right and antiestablishment dimensions of American political opinion.

That said, Left-Right orientations are fundamental to mass opinion because these are the dominant ideas and identities that link people to the political system, and elites and the politically sophisticated portion of the public are largely aligned along this dimension. However, Figure 6-2 suggests that when politicians and other elites employ antiestablishment rhetoric, they can “pull” the antiestablishment dimension toward their end of the Left-Right

continuum, effectively blending these once-unrelated sentiments. Even though [Figure 6-2](#) depicts clockwise movement toward the political Right, this “pull” can be attempted by politicians on the Right or Left (or both simultaneously).

It is usually in the interest of politicians to work within the existing political order, because doing so provides access to long-standing interests, ready-made coalitions, and stable voter preferences.²⁴ However, under some circumstances it can be in the interest of political actors to establish new coalitions by reaching beyond established ones. Outsiders and losing coalitions, given that they are failing under current conditions, should be most likely to attempt to reshape the playing field and generate collective action along new lines. This could even involve altering the established norms of how conflict is conducted. Returning to our above discussion of Trump’s 2016 campaign, Trump entered the Republican primaries as a candidate with no political experience, no conservative track record, and no preexisting coalition. Since he could not compete on such a playing field, he changed the game by engaging in antiestablishment rhetoric and building a coalition that was a blend of antiestablishment sentiments and conservative positions. This worked well, given both that Trump was a political outsider and that his opponents in both the primary contest (e.g., Jeb Bush) and general election (e.g., Hillary Clinton) were fixtures of the establishment. Trump’s Republican Party now is far different from the Republican Party prior to Trump: conspiracy theories, populist sentiment, and violent rhetoric aimed at locking up or even harming political opponents now dominate, with more traditional Republicans being shunted aside.

In extreme circumstances, approval of the established order itself can be a subject of contention. When elites espousing antiestablishment sentiments attain power, they bring the “politics of opposition to those wielding power” into the halls of power.²⁵ This can be a “disruptive force” that destabilizes institutions, creates chaotic policy agendas, and integrates into the established order groups that were once antagonistic toward that very order.²⁶ Such outcomes could easily be mistaken for extreme partisanship and ideology (i.e., the “Far Right”), even though they are borne of neither.

Take, for example, the so-called *alt-Right*, an “extreme” (e.g., violent, conspiratorial) faction, supposedly of the political “Right,”

that has garnered close attention since the 2016 US presidential election. Given their disdain for “mainstream” conservatism and distrust of the establishment, we might think of “alt-Right” sentiments as a blend of conservatism and antiestablishment orientations rather than as an expression of “extreme” conservatism. Although it is tempting to think of such groups as “extremist” or to dichotomize political thought and identities, such thinking may obscure the dynamics in play. As political scientist George Hawley argues, “people tend to think in dichotomies: Republican vs. Democrat, liberal vs. conservative. Thus, whenever a new radical voice emerges on the political right, there is a tendency to describe it as a more extreme version of conservatism. In the case of the alt-Right, this is inappropriate . . . it is not just a racist version of mainstream, *National Review*-style conservatism . . . it is totally distinct from conservatism.”²⁷ Much the same can be said of extremist groups on the political Left, such as Antifa. By this way of thinking, Donald Trump’s conspiratorial, populist, and Manichean rhetoric appeals to individuals who are not strong conservatives or Republicans in the traditional style of William F. Buckley or a similar ideologue. In reaction to Trump’s antiestablishment appeals, Hillary Clinton denounced Trump’s rhetoric and his coalition, transforming the 2016 race into a choice not just between Left and Right, Democrat and Republican, but between the establishment and the antiestablishment.²⁸

To summarize this section, antiestablishment orientations are widespread, distinct from traditional Left-Right orientations, and they matter, especially when activated by strategic elites. The political and psychological traits that are associated with antiestablishment orientations—the acceptance of political violence, the dark personality traits, and the willingness to share false information—may appear to be a manifestation of extreme Left-Right polarization but are instead best thought of as a consequence of the mobilization of individuals who are critical of the system to the point of wanting to tear it down.

Trump-Russia Conspiracy Theories

Hillary Clinton, after defeating Sanders in the 2016 Democratic primary, ran a mainstream campaign but employed conspiracy theories, on occasion, to battle Trump. While Clinton argued that

Donald Trump was unfit to be president (partially because he was a conspiracy theorist!), she also claimed that Trump was engaged in nefarious, conspiratorial activities with Russia:²⁹ “There’s something he’s hiding; we’ll guess, we’ll keep guessing at what it might be,” she said during a presidential debate.³⁰

Clinton’s accusations of coordination between Trump and Russia remained politically salient for at least three subsequent years, becoming a rallying cry for Democrats. This should come as no surprise, given that Democrats lost the White House and Congress in 2016—as the previous chapter argued, conspiracy theories are for losers. Being on the losing end of a power asymmetry disposes people to conspiracy theorizing, which is further inflamed vis-à-vis elite partisan cues.³¹ Regardless, the Trump-Russia conspiracy theories gave way to the Mueller investigation, which wielded substantial power over the fate of Trump.

During Trump’s presidency, left-leaning media (e.g., MSNBC) fixated on Trump-Russia conspiracy theories. The narrative played into their audience’s ideology and fears and performed the function of absolving Democrats of blame for their party’s defeat in 2016. *Rolling Stone* journalist Matt Taibbi was one of a handful of Trump-Russia skeptics on the Left:

The 2016 campaign season brought to the surface awesome levels of political discontent. After the election, instead of wondering where that anger came from, most of the press quickly pivoted to a new tale about a Russian plot to attack our Democracy. This conveyed the impression that the election season we’d just lived through had been an aberration, thrown off the rails by an extraordinary espionage conspiracy between Trump and a cabal of evil foreigners.

This narrative contradicted everything I’d seen traveling across America in my two years of covering the campaign. The overwhelming theme of that race, long before anyone even thought about Russia, was voter rage at the entire political system. The anger wasn’t just on the Republican side, where Trump humiliated the Republicans’ chosen \$150 million contender, Jeb Bush (who got three delegates, or \$50 million per delegate). It was also evident on the Democratic side, where a self-proclaimed “Democratic Socialist” with little money and close to no institutional support became a surprise contender.

Because of a series of press misdiagnoses before the Russiagate stories even began, much of the American public was unprepared for news of a Trump win. A cloak-and-dagger election-fixing conspiracy

therefore seemed more likely than it might have otherwise to large parts of the domestic news audience, because they hadn't been prepared for anything else that would make sense. This was particularly true of upscale, urban, blue-leaning news consumers, who were not told to take the possibility of a Trump White House seriously.

Priority number-one of the political class after a vulgar, out-of-work game-show host conquered the White House should have been a long period of ruthless self-examination. [The Trump-Russia conspiracy theory] delayed that for at least two years.³²

This turn to conspiracy theories occurred on social media as well, as *The Atlantic* reported,

The Trump era has given rise to a vast alternative left-wing media infrastructure that operates largely out of the view of casual news consumers, but commands a massive audience and growing influence in liberal America. There are polemical podcasters and partisan click farms; wild-eyed conspiracists and cynical fabulists. Some traffic heavily in rumor and wage campaigns of misinformation; others are merely aggregators and commentators who have carved out a corner of the web for themselves. But taken together, they form a media universe where partisan hysteria is too easily stoked, and fake news can travel at the speed of light. . . .

In past political epochs, popular conspiracy theories spread via pamphlets left on windshields, or chain emails forwarded thousands of times. These days, the tinfoil-hat crowd gathers on Twitter. People like [Louise] Mensch, Claude Taylor, Andrea Chalupa, Eric Garland, and Leah McElrath feed their followers a steady diet of highly provocative speculation, rumor, and innuendo that makes it sound as if Trump's presidency—and, really, the entire Republican Party—is perpetually on the verge of a spectacular meltdown.

The most prolific of the conspiracy-mongers tend to focus on the Russia scandal, weaving a narrative so sensationalistic and complex that it could pass for a Netflix political drama. Theirs is a world where it is acceptable to allege that hundreds of American politicians, journalists, and government officials are actually secret Russian agents; that Andrew Breitbart was murdered by Vladimir Putin; that the Kremlin has "kompromat" on *everyone*, and oh-by-the-way a presidency-ending sex tape is going to drop any day now.³³

Democrats' turn toward conspiracy theories incentivized news outlets to chase sensationalist and dystopian headlines. Responding

to their incentives, some outlets printed stories without proper vetting, some of which contained outright falsehoods. As some journalists pointed out, the errors were not the result of sloppiness but rather of a concerted effort to engage with a particular point of view.³⁴

Mistakes in the news reporting were myriad, including assertions that Russia-funded news channel RT had taken over C-SPAN, that Russians hacked into the US electricity grid, that many mainstream political websites were outlets for Russian propaganda, that former Trump aide Anthony Scar-amucci was under investigation for involvement with a Russian hedge fund, that Trump was communicating to a Russian bank through a secret internet server, and that former Trump advisor Paul Manafort had visited Julian Assange prior to the release of illegally obtained WikiLeaks documents.³⁵ The list could go on. While some of these reports were eventually corrected, many have yet to be.

On March 24, 2019, after more than two years of investigation and open speculation, Attorney General William Barr released an initial summary of the Mueller report, with the full (albeit slightly redacted) report being released a month later. To Trump supporters and others skeptical of the Trump-Russia narrative, the report quashed the Trump-Russia conspiracy theories and called for a reckoning in the Democratic establishment and in the media:

The key fact is this: Mueller—contrary to weeks of false media claims—did not merely issue a narrow, cramped, legalistic finding that there was insufficient evidence to indict Trump associates for conspiring with Russia and then proving their guilt beyond a reasonable doubt. That would have been devastating enough to those who spent the last two years or more misleading people to believe that conspiracy convictions of Trump’s closest aides and family members were inevitable. But his mandate was much broader than that: to state what did or did not happen.

That’s precisely what he did: Mueller, in addition to concluding that evidence was insufficient to charge any American with crimes relating to Russian election interference, also stated emphatically in numerous instances that there was no evidence—not merely that there was insufficient evidence to obtain a criminal conviction—that key prongs of this three-year-old conspiracy theory actually happened. . . .

With regard to Facebook ads and Twitter posts . . . , Mueller could not have been more blunt: “The investigation *did not identify*

evidence that any U.S. persons knowingly or intentionally coordinated with [Russia's] interference operation" (emphasis added). Note that this exoneration includes not only Trump campaign officials but all Americans.³⁶

Mueller's inability to find evidence for the contention that Trump conspired with Russia put into perspective how fantastical some of the mainstream coverage of the Trump-Russia conspiracy theories had become. The profit motives of newsrooms were likely to blame for the coverage, given that the American Left was out of power, detested Trump, and was anxiously looking for a narrative to salve its wounds.³⁷

Regardless of the outcome of the investigations, the conspiracy theory beliefs about Trump and Russia have survived. *New York* magazine columnist Jonathan Chait suggested, prior to the release of the Mueller report, that Trump had been a Russian asset since the 1980s.³⁸ Discussing a meeting between Trump and Putin, Chait asked, "Will Trump Be Meeting with His Counterpart—or His Handler?"³⁹ One would think that Mueller's findings would have stymied such wild-eyed and dangerous speculations, but it did not. Chait, following the release of Mueller's findings, only doubled down: "I wrote an article suggesting Trump was compromised by Russia. I was right."⁴⁰ Hundreds of Trump-Russia conspiracy theories were advanced before Mueller's findings were released; those theories' predictions have gone unfulfilled as of this writing.⁴¹ Yet conspiracy theorists have continued to claim that they were right all along. Trump-Russia conspiracy theorists, like any other conspiracy theorist, continue to play tennis without a net.

The Trump-Russia episode shows how conspiracy theories often beget additional conspiracy theories. Responding to Trump's claims that the election would be rigged, Hillary Clinton and many Democrats claimed that consequential election fraud could not take place.⁴² But after their defeat in 2016, the Left quickly blamed their loss on an elaborate Russian scheme to rig the election.

Putting the shoe on the other foot, Trump dipped his toe in politics in 2011, when he suggested that Barack Obama was a foreign usurper with a phony birth certificate. Just as Obama had to spend time, effort, and precious political capital addressing such accusations, Trump had to do the same. But rather than largely abandon conspiracy theorizing once in office, Trump chose to counter the accusations of Russian collusion with his own

conspiracy theories about being the victim of a plot by a corrupt establishment.



Figure 6-3. Polarized parties transmit “cues” to their followers; often these cues are accusations aimed at their opposition, which further divide the country and polarize the populace.

GettyImages

Consequences of Conspiracy Theory Politics

In [chapter 5](#) we discussed the idea that conspiracy theories are often used by electoral losers to explain away their losses and to come to terms with being ruled by the “other.” Therefore, it might seem odd, given that they won in 2016, that Trump supporters trafficked in so many conspiracy theories while Trump was in office. It is important to remember, however, that Trump built his coalition by appealing more to conspiracy theory beliefs and related populist sentiments than to partisanship. He and his supporters have used conspiracy theories to fight what they have seen as an unfair conspiracy against them.⁴³

In this environment, each new conspiracy theory breeds more. And ongoing investigations have uncovered or suggested the existence of shady activities, subterfuge, or outright conspiracy by myriad actors. Did conspiracy theories about an outsider winning the White House drive government agents to conspire against then candidate Donald Trump? Were the Trump-Russia conspiracy theories part of a plan by Clinton and other actors to discredit the Trump campaign? Was the Mueller investigation a vast over-

reaction to a conspiracy theory? Did the Trump-Russia conspiracy theories lead Trump to commit actual crimes, such as obstruction of justice? The growing number of opposing conspiracy theories have made truth quite difficult to decipher. Even with Trump out of office, his conspiracy theories still loom large over politics. His claim that the 2020 election was rigged remains widespread and influential in Republican politics two years after the fact.

Political scientists Matthew Atkinson and Darin DeWitt view conspiracy theories as a disruptive tool that can change the political playing field in favor of outsiders and upstarts.⁴⁴ But this view is descriptive rather than normative; it does not address the negative side effects that arise when unscrupulous politicians or a profit-driven media use conspiracy theories to manipulate people.

Political theorist Alfred Moore delves into these consequences of conspiracy theory politics, noting the effects this style of rhetoric has on how people interact with information: people begin to distrust legitimate sources of news, relying more and more on less and less. Conspiracy theory politics pushes people first to partisan news but then to more fringe alternative sources. It causes people to vehemently reject information sources with which they do not agree.⁴⁵ One cannot make meaningful decisions in a democracy if awash in a sea of conspiracy theories, and one cannot compromise with opponents if one believes those opponents are engaged in a vast conspiracy. Even though personal electoral advantages may spring from conspiracy theory politics, a considerable societal price is paid.

Conclusion

During the 2016 election, Hillary Clinton noted a stark change in the Republican Party once Trump had secured the nomination. She called it “a moment of reckoning for every Republican dismayed that the party of Lincoln has become the party of Trump.” To her and many others, Trump’s politics was “not conservatism as we have known it . . . not Republicanism as we have known it.”⁴⁶ To make her point, Clinton compared Trump to his predecessors: “Twenty years ago, when Bob Dole accepted the Republican nomination, he pointed to the exits and told any racists in the party to get out. The week after 9/11, George W. Bush went to a mosque and declared for everyone to hear that Muslims ‘love America just

as much as I do.’ In 2008, John McCain told his own supporters they were wrong about the man he was trying to defeat. Senator McCain made sure they knew Barack Obama is an American citizen and ‘a decent person.’”⁴⁷

Recent years have witnessed a surge in conspiratorial, populist, and Manichean rhetoric coming from our political leaders, most notably Donald Trump in the United States, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, and Boris Johnson in the UK. Trump’s use of conspiratorial rhetoric helped him build a coalition strong enough to win the White House in 2016; this rhetoric has also helped him transform the Republican Party from the party of Ronald Reagan to the party of Trump. Many politicians, particularly on the Right, are following in Trump’s footsteps by accusing their opponents, the opposing party, and the whole of the political establishment of engaging in vast conspiracies against the people. This rhetoric not only mobilizes people with antisocial traits but also sets expectations for the leaders who in engage in that conspiratorial rhetoric: their supporters expect action, and if it doesn’t materialize, they may be willing to take that action themselves, perhaps with deadly consequences.

Discussion Questions

1. What are the strategic incentives that political candidates have to engage in conspiracy theory politics?
2. What are the effects of politicians publicly engaging in conspiracy theorizing?
3. What can or should be done about politicians engaging in conspiracy theories?

Key Terms and Concepts

Alt-Right

Antiestablishment

Antifa

Conspiracy Theory Politics

Mueller Investigation

“Top-Down” Leadership

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QAnon, COVID-19, Social Media, and the Era of “Post-Truth”

Since 2015, many observers have been concerned by the supposed rising levels of conspiracy theory beliefs among the mass public. Journalists, for instance, have repeatedly claimed that we are living in the “golden age” of conspiracy theorizing, a “post-truth” wasteland in which facts no longer matter and “infodemics” abound.¹ These claims express an obvious negative view of our information environment, given that post-truth denotes “circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief,” and an infodemic is an environment in which there is “too much information including false or misleading information in digital and physical environments[, which] . . . causes confusion and risk-taking behaviors [and] . . . also leads to mistrust.”² Many journalists tend to pin the blame for our supposed collective descent into the crisis of information and truth on the internet and social media, citing the ease with which anyone with an internet

connection can spread conspiracy theories and misinformation without fear of gatekeeping or consequence.

The public largely agrees with the journalists and other opinion leaders expressing these concerns. About 70 percent of Americans believe that conspiracy theories are “out of control,” 60 percent agree that people are more likely to believe conspiracy theories “compared to 25 years ago,” and the vast majority believe that social media and the internet are responsible for these increases.³ Many scholars agree as well, prompting calls for additional scrutiny of social media and its effects.⁴ Responding to these sentiments, governments and social media platforms have sought to address the feared increase in conspiracy theorizing vis-à-vis various forms of online content moderation and censorship.⁵

However, in a rush to explain the increase in conspiracy theorizing, many have overlooked an important first step: determining whether conspiracy theorizing (or any other malady) has, indeed, increased over time. While journalistic accounts suggest that conspiracy theory beliefs have been on the rise, it is not clear to researchers that such beliefs are more popular now than in the past. And, indeed, little evidence has been presented by those sounding the alarm. As one Vox journalist reported, “there’s no hard evidence that conspiracy theories are circulating more widely today than ever before. But . . . it has certainly seemed like average Americans have bought into them more and more.”⁶ In reading this book, one thing that should have become apparent by now is that what “seems” to be true to any one person (even to well-meaning journalists) might not actually be so. Careful measurement is critical to productive discussions of both the popularity and effects of conspiracy theories, especially when government officials and other powerful actors are proposing to censor speech as a solution.

We surmise that the attention being paid to conspiracy theories by politicians and the press has been mistaken for an actual increase in the number of conspiracy theories or the prevalence of conspiracy theory beliefs. Coverage of and attention to conspiracy theories has unquestionably increased over time, particularly since 2015. Prior to that time, very few stories were written about conspiracy theories in mainstream journalistic outlets; by 2016 between fifty and a hundred stories were being published every day.⁷ This trend applies not just to conspiracy theories, but to misinformation, disinformation, and fake news as well. The amount

of media coverage and elite attention devoted to a given topic—for example, crime, economic conditions, gas prices—is oftentimes disconnected from the real-world trends.⁸ With heightened media coverage and elite attention to the topic of conspiracy theories, many of us have become victims of confirmation bias and frequency bias: because we keep hearing about conspiracy theories, we are on high alert for them and, therefore, pay more attention when exposed to them (sometimes this tendency is referred to as the Baader–Meinhof phenomenon). Thus, people can come to believe that conspiracy theories “are everywhere” or are spreading “more than ever before,” irrespective of the fact of the matter.

There are many reasons why even mainstream media has paid so much attention to conspiracy theories (and misinformation, disinformation, and fake news) in recent years. First, the election of Donald Trump and the outcome of the Brexit vote were quite jarring for many politicians, journalists, and other establishment elites—so much so that they required a unique explanation. For some, it was easier to believe that the masses had been tricked into voting for Trump and Brexit than it was to believe that people made their choices purposely or based upon some rational considerations.⁹

Second, the mainstream media has been in decline for decades, and the internet—competitor to the mainstream media—has been one of several major factors driving that decline. Legacy media have always attacked new competitors to the information marketplace, often levying accusations regarding the danger or trustworthiness of new media; therefore, the recent attempts by legacy media to blame social media for encouraging problematic beliefs and behaviors are not only self-interested but to be expected.¹⁰ Relatedly, tech “panics” are quite common. New technologies and forms of communication are frequently blamed for old problems, even when those problems long predate the new technology. Society, in the past, has taken aim at newspapers, novels, photography, records, radio, television, comic books, cable television, and video games, but as those technologies and forms of communication became accepted and integrated into society, the associated panics subsided. The criticisms faced by the internet and social media are eerily similar to those levied at preceding technologies.¹¹

In this chapter, we consider the effect of the internet and social media on the spread of conspiracy theories. We first examine

whether beliefs in conspiracy theories have increased over time. This examination begins with QAnon and COVID-19 conspiracy theories. Next, we examine the over-time trends in beliefs in many additional conspiracy theories, as well as the tendency toward conspiracy theorizing. Following this, we carefully consider the relationship between internet and social media use and conspiracy theory beliefs. We focus on (1) the effect of exposure to conspiracy theories on beliefs and (2) the effect of conspiracy theory beliefs on deleterious actions such as vaccine refusal and violence. We then discuss various methods for stunting conspiracy theories and their potential consequences. Finally, we conclude this chapter by examining what seems to be a brewing “satanic panic” in American political culture.

QAnon

QAnon began in 2017 with anonymous posts on the 4Chan imageboard. The principal actor, a supposed secret agent posting under the pseudonym “Q,” claimed to be working with the military and Donald Trump to root out a deep state cabal comprised of satanic sex-traffickers, pedophiles, and baby eaters. QAnon lore lionized Trump because he was a political outsider who ran against the establishment as much as he campaigned against the Democratic Party.¹² The QAnon movement, however, took Trump’s rhetoric to the extreme: rather than referring to opponents as corrupt or criminal, as Trump often did, QAnon portrayed them as evil. The group’s perceived enemies were not just competitors in pluralistic politics; they were guilty of irredeemable crimes, like child molestation, human trafficking, and murder.

While QAnon attracted media coverage shortly after its emergence, it was widely considered fringe by the media until the COVID-19 pandemic hit the United States in 2020. Once lockdowns prompted people to spend more time online, the scope of QAnon’s presence was more apparent, especially to journalists. Journalists began writing about belief in QAnon “growing,” riding the pandemic “to new heights.”¹³ Some news coverage suggested that the group had grown as large as major religions and political movements, such as the Tea Party.¹⁴ Coverage of this sort reached its peak when several QAnon adherents ran for office in 2020. Responding to the coverage, Congress passed a resolution

condemning QAnon, and many social media companies removed QAnon content from their platforms.¹⁵ But did the QAnon movement ever really grow to the heights that popular conjecture presumed?

Perhaps the most direct way to gauge the size of the group is by simply asking people, “Are you a believer in QAnon?” When posed to a nationwide sample in 2019, only 5 percent of Americans replied “yes.”¹⁶ If the news coverage of QAnon was correct, we would have expected the numbers to increase substantially by 2021, but we found an increase of only one percentage point.¹⁷ In statistical terms, this amounts to no change at all. These numbers are supported by other surveys asking respondents to rate the “QAnon movement” on a feeling thermometer ranging from 0 (very “cold,” negative feelings) to 100 (very “warm,” positive feelings). If belief in or support for QAnon were increasing, we would have expected the average rating that respondents assigned to it to increase over time. To the contrary, the ratings decreased over time! In 2019, the average rating was 21; by May 2021, the average rating was 16. In total, belief in and support for QAnon remained stable precisely when fears about growth of the movement peaked.

Beyond their canonical belief that “Q” was working with Trump to foil the deep state cabal, QAnon supporters appeared to believe a wide variety of other conspiracy theories, many of which were focused on the deep state and sex trafficking. When beliefs in such ideas were measured on polls, many of them were far more popular than QAnon itself. This was likely because the conspiracy theories that composed the QAnon movement pre-dated QAnon’s emergence in 2017. Indeed, Q appeared to “gamify” a set of existing conspiracy theories rather than create new ideas out of whole cloth.¹⁸ In other words, the QAnon movement immediately, naturally appealed to a preexisting contingent of individuals who already believed in conspiracy theories about the deep state, for example. Polls about the deep state and elite sex traffickers garnered support from between 34 percent and 50 percent of Americans, reaching far beyond the 5 percent to 7 percent who identified as believers in QAnon specifically. While the baseline levels of belief in these theories are normatively troubling, they were not created by QAnon, nor did they increase during the time that QAnon beliefs were said to be increasing, as can be seen in [Table 7.1](#).¹⁹

Table 7.1. Change in QAnon-Related Beliefs over Time

	Question Wording	Percentage (Time 1)	Percentage (Time 2)	Change
1.	Are you a believer in QAnon? (Yes/No)	5 (08/2019)	6 (05/2021)	+ 1
2.	There is a “deep state” embedded in the government that operates in secret and without oversight.	43 (03/2020)	44 (05/2021)	+ 1
3.	Elites, from government and Hollywood, are engaged in a massive child sex trafficking racket.	35 (10/2020)	34 (05/2021)	–1
4.	Jeffrey Epstein, the billionaire accused of running an elite sex trafficking ring, was murdered to cover up the activities of his criminal network.	50 (03/2020)	48 (05/2021)	–2

Source: March 2020, October 2020, and May 2021 Qualtrics surveys (see [appendix](#) for details). August 2019 data point from Emerson College Polling.

Note: Percentages correspond to those saying they “agree” or “strongly agree” with each sentiment.

Many of the ideas associated with QAnon were treated as bizarre by journalists and other observers, even though those beliefs garnered considerable support. This is likely because many of these beliefs involve accusations that the establishment—mainstream media, political elites, and social institutions—was either conspiring or covering up various conspiracies. In other words, journalists—as

fixtures of the establishment taken aim at by QAnon-related conspiracy theories—were inherently unlikely to be supportive of QAnon or related ideas. Additionally, reporting on QAnon’s size and growth during the COVID-19 pandemic was frequently inferred from data that was ill-suited for estimating the size of such a group, such as the number of people wearing Q T-shirts at Trump rallies and rough estimations of social media activity. Both journalists’ personal orientations toward the beliefs associated with QAnon and dubious data likely contributed to the misunderstanding of the QAnon movement’s scope and size. Of course, circumstances could change, prompting growth in the QAnon movement in the future. But we should not make claims about such growth until after it occurs.



Figure 7-1. Many people refused to take the COVID-19 vaccine believing that it had microchips, fetal DNA, or other hidden ingredients.

GettyImages

COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories

Throughout the pandemic, many scholars and journalists argued that COVID-19 conspiracy theory beliefs were spreading largely due to social media use. While plenty of conspiracy theories and

misinformation about the pandemic proliferated at that time, concerns about the conspiracy theories and misinformation were as prominent as the actual conspiracy theories and misinformation. For example, the World Health Organization proclaimed that the COVID-19 pandemic was matched by an infodemic as dangerous as the virus itself. As with concerns about the growth of QAnon, such fears were based on little systematic evidence and even at odds with over-time data that tracked beliefs across the span of the pandemic.

For example, over the first year of the pandemic, beliefs that “coronavirus was purposely created and released by powerful people as part of a conspiracy” and that “the threat of coronavirus has been exaggerated by political groups who want to damage President Trump” remained stable. The conspiracy theory that the coronavirus was “purposely created and released” found support among 31 percent of Americans in March 2020, 27 percent in June 2020, and 29 percent in May 2021. The theory that the coronavirus was exaggerated to “damage President Trump” stood at 29 percent in March 2020, 28 percent in June 2020, and then 31 percent in October 2020. Beliefs in additional conspiracy theories and related misinformation about COVID-19 were also quite stable over the course of the pandemic, as can be seen from the data presented in Table 7.2.²⁰ Moreover, beliefs about the role of 5G cellular technology and the benefits of ingesting disinfectant decreased significantly over time.

Table 7.2. Change in COVID-19 Conspiracy Beliefs and Misinformation over Time

		Percent, June 2020	Percent, May 2021	Change
Conspiracy Theories				
1.	The coronavirus is being used to force a dangerous and unnecessary vaccine on Americans.	25	24	-1
2.	Bill Gates is behind the coronavirus	13	10	-3

3.	pandemic. The coronavirus is being used to install tracking devices inside our bodies.	18	12	−6
Misinformation				
1.	The number of deaths related to the coronavirus has been exaggerated.	29	36	+ 7
2.	Hydroxychloroquine can prevent or cure COVID-19.	18	18	0
3.	5G cell phone technology is responsible for the spread of the coronavirus.	11	7	−4
4.	Putting disinfectant into your body can prevent or cure COVID-19.	12	6	−6

Source: June 2020 and May 2021 Qualtrics surveys (see [appendix](#) for details).

Note: Percentages correspond to those saying they “agree” or “strongly agree” with each sentiment. June 2020 and May 2021 polls were both online, opt-in.

Other Conspiracy Theory Beliefs Over Time

What about other conspiracy theories beyond COVID-19 and QAnon? Have conspiracy beliefs about JFK, UFOs, the Rothschilds, or fluoride increased over time? [Table 7.3](#) includes information about changes in thirty-seven additional conspiracy theories over time. These conspiracy theories differ in their general topic (e.g., science/technology, politics, UFOs), the accused conspirators (e.g., government, scientists, Big Pharma), salience (e.g., JFK assassination versus 5G technology), and the time span between the first available poll and the most recent one, which ranges from fifty-five years to just a few months.²¹

Table 7.3. Change in 37 Additional Conspiracy Beliefs over Time

	Question Wording	Percentage 1 (Time 1)	Percentage 2 (Time 2)	Change.
1.	Humans have made contact with aliens, and this fact has been deliberately hidden from the public.	23 (07/2019)	33 (03/2020)	+ 10
2.	Do you think the US government has engaged in the assassination of entertainers who have tried to spread a counterculture message they didn't like, such as John Lennon, Kurt Cobain, Tupac Shakur, and others, or not? ^a	12 (09/2013)	20 (05/2021)	+ 8
3.	Billionaire George Soros is behind a hidden plot to destabilize the American government, take control of the media, and put the world under his control.	19 (10/2011)	26 (05/2021)	+ 7
4.	Do you think one man was responsible for the assassination of President Kennedy, or do you think there were others involved?	50 (12/1966)	56 (05/2021)	+ 6
5.	Do you believe	15 (03/2013)	20 (05/2021)	+ 5

	that the pharmaceutical industry is in league with the medical industry to “invent” new diseases in order to make money, or not? ^a			
6.	Thinking about space exploration, do you think the government staged and faked the Apollo moon landings, or don't you feel that way?	6 (07/1995)	10 (05/2021)	+ 4
7.	Do you believe media or the government adds secret mind-controlling technology to television broadcast signals, or not? ^a	15 (03/2013)	17 (05/2021)	+ 2
8.	Do you believe the government adds fluoride to our water supply, not for dental health reasons but for other, more sinister reasons, or not? ^a	9 (03/2013)	11 (05/2021)	+ 2
9.	Do you think the government is keeping information from the public that shows UFOs (Unidentified Flying Objects) are real or that aliens have visited Earth?	49 (06/1996)	50 (05/2021)	+ 1
10.	Hillary Clinton	28 (03/2020)	29 (04/2021)	+ 1

	conspired to provide Russia with access to nuclear materials.			
11	The US government is mandating the switch to compact fluorescent light bulbs because such lights make people more obedient and easier to control.	11 (10/2011)	12 (05/2021)	+ 1
12	Health officials know that cell phones cause cancer but are doing nothing to stop it because large corporations won't let them.	20 (09/2013)	20 (05/2021)	0
13.	Certain US government officials planned the attacks of September 11, 2001, because they wanted the United States to go to war in the Middle East.	19 (10/2011)	19 (05/2021)	0
14.	Regardless of who is officially in charge of governments and other organizations, there is a single group of people who secretly control events and rule the world together.	35 (03/2020)	35 (10/2020)	0
15.	The number of Jews killed by the Nazis during	15 (03/2020)	15 (10/2020)	0

	World War II has been exaggerated on purpose.			
16.	Climate change is a hoax perpetrated by corrupt scientists and politicians.	19 (07/2019)	19 (10/2020)	0
17.	Barack Obama faked his citizenship to become president.	20 (03/2020)	19 (05/2021)	-1
18.	Do you completely agree, mostly agree, mostly disagree, or completely disagree that AIDS is a form of systematic destruction of minorities like Blacks and Hispanics?	16 (11/1995)	15 (05/2021)	-1
19.	The dangers of vaccines are being hidden by the medical establishment.	30 (03/2020)	29 (05/2021)	-1
20.	The Food and Drug Administration is deliberately preventing the public from getting natural cures for cancer and other diseases because of pressure from drug companies.	37 (09/2013)	35 (05/2021)	-2
21.	The one percent (1%) of the richest people in the United States control the government and	55 (03/2020)	52 (05/2021)	-3

	the economy for their own benefit.			
22.	A powerful family, the Rothschilds, through their wealth, controls governments, wars, and many countries' economies.	29 (03/2020)	26 (05/2021)	-3
23.	The AIDS virus was created and spread around the world on purpose by a secret organization.	22 (03/2020)	19 (06/2020)	-3
24.	The dangers of 5G cellphone technology are being covered up.	26 (03/2020)	23 (10/2020)	-3
25.	Do you feel that the assassination of Senator Robert Kennedy was the act of one individual or part of a larger conspiracy?	48 (03/1981)	43 (05/2021)	-5
26.	The dangers of genetically modified foods are being hidden from the public.	45 (03/2020)	40 (05/2021)	-5
27.	School shootings, like those at Sandy Hook, Connecticut, and Parkland, Florida, are false flag attacks perpetrated by the government.	17 (03/2020)	12 (10/2020)	-5
28.	Do you believe that Osama bin	11 (06/2011)	5 (05/2021)	-6

	Laden is dead, or do you think he is still alive?			
29.	Donald Trump colluded with Russia to rig the 2016 presidential election.	41 (07/2019)	34 (05/2021)	-7
30.	Some people have argued that President Franklin D. Roosevelt knew about Japanese plans to bomb Pearl Harbor but did nothing about it because he wanted an excuse to involve the US (United States) on the side of the Allies in the war.	31 (11/1991)	19 (05/2021)	-12
31.	Republicans won the presidential elections in 2016, 2004, and 2000 by stealing them.	27 (03/2020)	15 (05/2021)	-12
32.	Do you believe global warming is a hoax, or not?	37 (03/2013)	19 (05/2021)	-18
33.	Some people are hiding the truth about the December 14, 2012, school shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary in order to advance a political agenda. ^a	37 (04/2013)	16 (05/2021)	-21
34.	Do you think there was a police	34 (10/1995)	11 (05/2021)	-23

	conspiracy to frame O. J. Simpson, or not?			
35.	Do you feel that the assassination of Martin Luther King was the act of one individual or part of a larger conspiracy?	59 (03/1981)	33 (05/2021)	-26
36.	Do you think there is, or is not, a national conspiracy to kill police?	44 (11/1970)	16 (05/2021)	-28

In some cases, conspiracy theory beliefs have increased; in others the change is minimal, or we observe decreases. In total, eleven of the beliefs in [Table 7.3](#) have increased in popularity, five have remained perfectly stable, and twenty-one have decreased. On balance, many conspiracy theories tend to decrease in popularity over time, rather than increase.

Moving away from beliefs in specific conspiracy theories, we might consider whether people have become more conspiracy-minded, in general, over time. [Figure 7-2](#) plots the average level of conspiracy thinking among Americans over time, beginning with the first available data point in 2012.²² Here, conspiracy thinking is measured using the American Conspiracy Thinking Scale (ACTS), which asks survey respondents to react, using five-point scales ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree,” to each of the following four items:

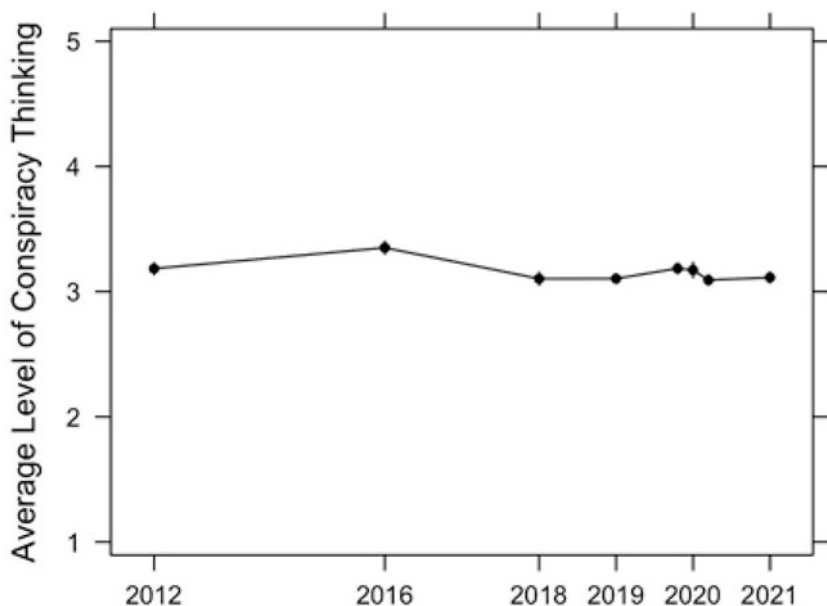


Figure 7-2. Average level of conspiracy thinking, on a scale ranging from 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest), over time. Vertical bars represent 95 percent confidence intervals. Many sources, see [appendix](#) for details.

1. Even though we live in a democracy, a few people will always run things anyway.
2. The people who really “run” the country are not known to the voters.
3. Big events like wars, the recent recession, and the outcomes of elections are controlled by small groups of people who are working in secret against the rest of us.
4. Much of our lives is being controlled by plots hatched in secret places.

Respondents in the upper third of the ACTS (i.e., those who tend to strongly agree with the above four statements) express belief in about three times as many specific conspiracy theories than those falling in the lower third of the scale.²³ As is clear from [Figure 7-2](#), the tendency toward conspiracy thinking has remained remarkably stable over time.

The evidence presented so far in this chapter suggests that neither specific conspiracy theory beliefs nor conspiracy thinking

have systematically increased over time. Of course, this neither precludes the possibility of increases in the future nor implies that increases have not occurred at some point in the past prior to our data collection. Nonetheless, the trends we observe should prompt a reexamination of both the popular claim that conspiracy theories are on the rise and the implications of that popular claim.

Online Exposure to Conspiracy Theories

Are the internet and social media principally to blame for a new era of conspiracy theorizing? A great deal of reporting seems to suggest that internet and, in particular, social media exposure *cause* people to believe conspiracy theories. After all, it is easy to find information about conspiracy theories on the internet. For example, a Google search for the term “conspiracy theory” returns 15.9 million results.²⁴ It is easy to agree with journalists who claim that “when you start looking for conspiracy theories online, they seem to be everywhere.”²⁵ At the same time, data from preceding sections in this chapter demonstrate that conspiracy theory beliefs have not tended to increase on average, before and after the proliferation of the internet and social media. These trends imply that, if social media is promoting conspiracy theories in some way, it is not registering on public opinion polls.

Blaming new technologies for social ills is a time-honored tradition. Cable television, broadcast television, radio, newspapers, the printing press, and even paper faced criticisms from contemporary social commentators looking to connect a complex social problem to a simple cause. Unfortunately, criticisms such as these fail to account for human agency, frequently assuming—erroneously—that people are incapable of resisting negative influence, despite decades’ worth of research into media effects, propaganda, and advertising. The particular charge against social media and the internet, more generally, that we interrogate below goes something like this: *the internet/social media has caused an increase in conspiracy theory beliefs, which subsequently promote negative behavioral outcomes* (e.g., violence, refusing to vaccinate).



Figure 7-3. Naïve conceptual model of the influence of (online) exposure to conspiracy theory and misinformation on beliefs in such ideas and subsequent behaviors.

This line of thinking is neatly summarized by the conceptual model presented in [Figure 7-3](#). By perhaps the most popular accounts of conspiracy theory beliefs and their consequences, the causal first mover is exposure to conspiracy theories (and misinformation, fake news, etc.), primarily online. Below, we interrogate this theoretical model, paying special attention to related literatures on media effects, the causes of conspiracy theory beliefs, and the like. This leads to a refined conceptual model of the relationship between media exposure, beliefs, actions, and other political, social, and psychological motivations, such as those we have discussed in previous chapters.

Does Online Exposure Spread Conspiracy Theories?

To understand the role of the internet and social media in promoting or “spreading” conspiracy theories, we first need to understand the relative prominence of conspiracy theories and other information online. There is a seemingly infinite sea of conspiracy theories scattered across the internet and social media platforms—so large that cataloguing the population would be (nearly) impossible. This much seems to be true. However, a great deal of true, high-quality information—not to mention other benign opinions—are also available online. Studies of the prominence of misinformation on social media find that high-quality information far outpaces misinformation in general prevalence and the tendency to be shared.²⁶ Indeed, conspiracy theory websites are not highly trafficked in comparison to more mainstream outlets in the United States. The main 9/11 truther website, 911Truth.org, ranks as the 763,533th most trafficked (as of September 2022); Alex Jones’s InfoWars.com—perhaps the most popular conspiracy theory site—is

ranked 2,530. For comparison, the *New York Times* website comes in at 28th.²⁷ The internet has surely facilitated access to conspiracy theories; however, the same can be said of all information, including true, authoritative, high-quality information.²⁸ In other words, one is quite unlikely to be exposed to conspiracy theories and related ideas unless one is intentionally seeking them out; seemingly, not that many people are.

Moreover, given the popularity and reach of mainstream news sources, even online, it is quite likely that exposure to conspiracy theories would come in the form of reporting that is critical of or that seeks to debunk conspiracy theories, rather than pro-conspiratorial content. Indeed, an examination of a year's worth of news stories and blog posts on Google's search engine showed that of three thousand stories referencing conspiracy theories, 63 percent framed the conspiracy theory negatively, with pejoratives such as "fantasy" or "bizarre"; 17 percent framed the conspiracy theory discussed more neutrally, and only 19 percent framed the conspiracy theory in a positive light.²⁹ QAnon serves as a more specific example of this pattern. In early 2020, Pew surveyed Americans about their knowledge of QAnon.³⁰ Most people had not heard of it; of those who had, most had heard about it through mainstream sources of news, which portrayed the group quite negatively.

One reason for the negative portrayal of conspiracy theories is that elite rhetoric in Western societies tends to have an anti-conspiracy theory bias. Likewise, most citizens in Western societies tend to accept their respective political system as legitimate rather than as inherently corrupt or the product of a conspiracy. Regardless of the reason, mainstream news coverage is one mechanism by which conspiracy theories and other dubious information online is corrected—journalists and others are typically quick to question or debunk conspiracy theories when they emerge.³¹ This often involves shaming those who are propagating conspiracy theories. For example, after the tragic shooting at Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, during which seventeen students and staff were killed, conspiracy theorists took to social media to call the shooting a false flag. Many conspiracy theorists argued that the shooting had been faked using professional "crisis actors." As soon as these conspiracy theories hit social media, mainstream news sources quickly denounced them.³² This process

happens so quickly in some instances that conspiracy theories have little time to develop, gain followers, and amass a body of supportive evidence before they are publicly ridiculed and refuted.³³

To take stock, conspiracy theories and other dubious information are not more prevalent online than high-quality information and mainstream information sources that still manage to exert meaningful gatekeeping and correction power over even those theories that appear to be out of reach on social media.³⁴ Is it perhaps, however, that those conspiracy theories that do exist still tend to spread faster or farther than truthful information or otherwise excite or animate people in a way that quality information does not? Journalistic reporting tends to assume conspiracy theories spread in snowball fashion online: theories convince a small number of people, who share the information, with the theory subsequently gaining more converts after every additional share. This is the basic process by which information goes “viral” online.

This causal process also presumes that people indiscriminately view, believe, and then share much of the information—conspiracy theories or not—that they encounter. As our previous discussion of the role of political, psychological, and social motivations—as well as top-down elite communication and situational factors—implies, this is not how people navigate the information environment or form new beliefs. Instead, people tend to intentionally view (ignore) and accept (reject) information that is congruent (incongruent) with previously held beliefs, predispositions, values, identities, and other motivations—a process called “selective exposure.”³⁵ Even when one is incidentally exposed to a conspiracy theory on social media, for example, they are unlikely to accept it if it conflicts with preexisting beliefs and dispositions, like one’s tendency (or lack thereof) toward conspiracy thinking, partisanship, ideology, or personality traits that foster conspiracism (e.g., dark triad). Simply put, people who reject conspiracy theories do not utilize the internet for seeking them out, nor are they likely to believe them once encountered.³⁶ Likewise, the people who access conspiracy theories online tend to be disposed toward those theories—they are seeking out confirmatory evidence for ideas they already believe.³⁷

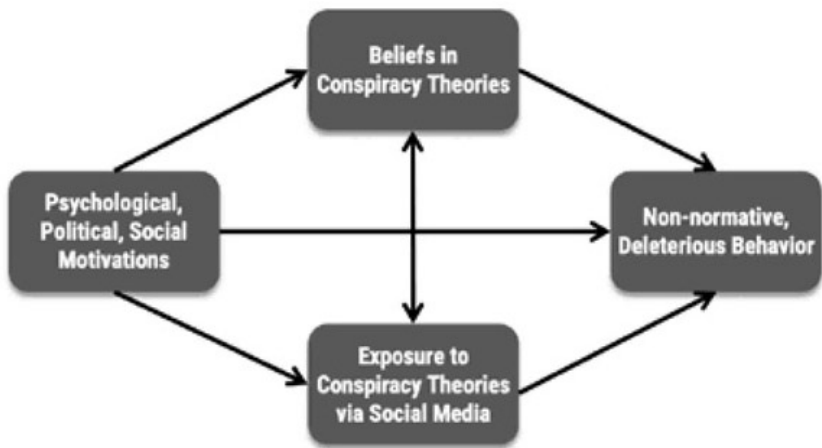


Figure 7-4. Informed conceptual model of the relationship between (online) exposure to conspiracy theory and misinformation, beliefs in such ideas, subsequent behaviors, and individual-level motivations.

A long and growing body of literature suggests that the relationship between social media use and conspiracy theory beliefs is more complicated than the naïve conceptual model in [Figure 7-3](#). We propose an alternative model in [Figure 7-4](#), one that better captures the complexity of relationships between individual-level motivations, social media use, conspiracy theory beliefs, and the behaviors linked to those exposures and beliefs. This model puts individual political, psychological, and social motivations as the primary causal mechanism, which subsequently impacts online exposure (or lack thereof) to conspiracy theories, conspiracy theory beliefs themselves, and even troubling behaviors. This is not to say that incidental exposure to conspiracy theories does not occur or that people cannot be persuaded by online content. However, decades' worth of research on media effects, propaganda, and advertising show that changing minds is not particularly easy when those minds are not open to the new information—this is so when it comes to exposure to conspiracy theories just as when it comes to exposure to television ads for automobiles.

The Effect of Conspiracy Theory Beliefs on Deleterious Actions

Numerous studies find correlations between conspiracy theory beliefs and a range of intentions and behaviors. These behaviors include unadvisable medical decisions, criminal behavior, and political violence.³⁸ During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, the stockpiling of weapons, the refusal to socially distance or wear masks, and the rejection of COVID-19 vaccines were each found to be correlated with conspiracy theory beliefs.³⁹

Beyond scientific studies, journalists and other commentators also draw connections between behaviors and conspiracy theory beliefs, often bringing attention to the most egregious acts of violence. For example, murders, kidnappings, and terrorist acts committed by QAnon believers, mass shootings committed by believers in white genocide conspiracy theories, and political violence caused by those who believe in election fraud are frequently reported as being *caused by* exposure to, and belief in, conspiracy theories.⁴⁰

While conspiracy theory beliefs and such behaviors are regularly found to be correlated with each other, and believers in conspiracy theories do on occasion commit violence that is in accord with their beliefs, the causal story is complicated. Conspiracy theory beliefs could, of course, inform people's actions and lead them to partake in behaviors they otherwise would not have. But for people to engage in norm-breaking, dangerous, and illegal behaviors, they must also be inclined toward engaging in those actions. In other words, one is unlikely to commit a murder based on a conspiracy theory one believes if they are not already at least somewhat inclined toward committing violent actions—other individual-level and situational ingredients are frequently necessary to push one over the edge.

We should also consider two other possibilities: (1) that conspiracy theory beliefs are adopted after the fact, as a justification for actions a person may have taken anyway, and (2) that the same factors that promote behaviors also promote conspiracy theory beliefs simultaneously.⁴¹ Given the available polling data, we can surmise that most people believe in one conspiracy theory or another; however, most people are not acting on these beliefs in a discernible way. For example, most people who believe the 2020 election was rigged against Donald Trump were at home or at work on January 6, 2021; only a small number of people believing in election rigging—many of whom had a history

of prior violence—attended the “Save America” rally or stormed the Capitol building. And even those people who did take part were likely to have been prompted by more than just their beliefs in election fraud: Donald Trump and other high-profile elites pushed election fraud conspiracy theories for months and then organized a rally on the day Congress was certifying the 2020 election. Without top-down organization such as this, it strikes us as unlikely that conspiracy theory beliefs, on their own, would have resulted in the storming of the Capitol.

If conspiracy theory beliefs are not always the direct cause of disconcerting behaviors, then preventing those beliefs may have little effect on those behaviors. This said, there is a widespread assumption, as depicted in [Figure 7-3](#) above, that exposure promotes belief and that belief, in turn, promotes deleterious behaviors. Consequently, many of the interventions that have been proposed to prevent non-normative behaviors that are associated with conspiracy theory beliefs tend to focus on preventing or “correcting” beliefs.⁴²

Perhaps it is better to think of both beliefs and behaviors as the result of a complex set of idiosyncratic experiences, exposures, and traits. Simple incidental exposure to conspiracy theories is unlikely to cause attitude change or drive behaviors, and deleterious actions, such as extremist violence, are hard to predict. While the consistent correlations between conspiracy theory beliefs and deleterious and non-normative behaviors are reason enough for concern,⁴³ other factors such as long-term worldviews, identities, and personality traits may be more proximal causes of the behaviors we wish to prevent than are mere exposure to or belief in conspiracy theories.

A New Satanic Panic

As this primer comes to a close, we consider a group of conspiracy theories that could potentially be on the rise in the United States. The 1980s saw widespread societal concerns over Satanism, satanic cult abuse, and the influence of Satan in our culture.⁴⁴ This “satanic panic,” as it came to be known, led Americans to see Satan “in every heavy metal album, Smurfs episode, and Dungeons & Dragons game.”⁴⁵ The basic idea behind the panic was that satanic cults were powerful shadowy organizations that were grooming, kidnapping, abusing, and then eating children as part of their

rituals.⁴⁶

While little evidence of widespread satanic cult activity, ritual abuse, or organized satanic grooming emerged, the panic was not without real-world consequences. Innocent people were accused of, and imprisoned for, supposedly abusing children as part of satanic rituals.⁴⁷ Indeed, many lives were destroyed, and some people served long prison sentences before having their convictions overturned and being released. The McMartin Preschool case is perhaps the most well-known example and the one that seemed to spark other accusations of ritual sex abuse nationwide:

In 1983 in Manhattan Beach, the McMartin preschool was said to be the site of demonic abuse of hundreds of children after a mentally ill mother alleged her son had been violated. She wrote that “the goatman was there” and that the abuser “flew in the air.” An unhinged response by police and the media contributed to what was then the longest and costliest trial in U.S. history. One of the alleged victims later shared he had been pressured to invent his stories of abuse.⁴⁸



Figure 7-5. Many people believe that satanic cults are widespread in the United States and elsewhere.

GettyImages

No one was ever convicted in the McMartin case. And after the

hysteria subsided, the accusations—which were taken at face value at the time—began to look foolish.

Indeed, some of the early allegations were so fantastic as to make many people wonder later how anyone could have believed them in the first place. Really now, teachers chopped up animals, clubbed a horse to death with a baseball bat, sacrificed a baby in a church and made children drink the blood, dressed up as witches and flew in the air—and all this had been going on unnoticed for a good long while until a disturbed mother spoke up? Still, McMartin unleashed nationwide hysteria about child abuse and Satanism in schools. One report after another told of horrific practices, with the Devil often literally in the details.⁴⁹

As the panic entered the 1990s, it became less about Satan and satanic cults and more about a general uneasiness with various forms of social change—in particular, liberalizing views toward sexuality, especially homosexuality. This uneasiness was often ignited when children were perceived to be exposed to sexualizing content vis-à-vis secret messages in cartoons, television shows, and movies, many of which were supposedly intended to turn children gay or to sexualize them in some other way.

Despite the flimsy nature of these accusations (to be generous), a lack of supporting evidence, and the terrible consequences mentioned above, accusations involving ritual sex abuse and the sexualization of children have reappeared in American political discourse in 2022. For example, conservative commentator Charlie Kirk—a American conservative activist and radio talk show host who founded Turning Point USA—recently published an article in *Newsweek* warning of satanic activity:

There should be at least one “substantive evil” Americans can all agree to prevent: worshiping Satan. Yes, it’s an extreme example, but it’s also illustrative in helping to establish a rationale for conservatives as we navigate difficult debates over speech. For those who are unaware, Lucifer himself is venerated by a small but growing collection of adherents across all 50 states. There are a variety of different Satanist groups. Some of them are merely atheists hoping to offend Christians with juvenile stunts like placing a Baphomet statue next to the Nativity scene. But others take a much darker path.⁵⁰

Kirk’s answer to this growing evil is that Satan worshippers should

have their First Amendment rights revoked.

Where do you draw the line? We draw the line at Satan. He is real, and he is the personification of evil. Worship of Satan was never intended to be a right when the Constitution was drafted. The First Amendment reads, in part, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” “Religion” being the key word here. None of the Founding Fathers would have considered Satan worship to be a legitimate form of religion. And they would be right—it isn’t a religion, it’s an anti-religion, dedicated to desecrating and destroying Judeo-Christian traditions and societies. The libertarian values of “live and let live” are attractive to many, but there is no room for libertarianism in the face of true evil. Evils come in many forms and go by many names. But this example has the benefit of not being obscured or hidden, which is why it matters. By its very nature, evil cannot “live and let live.” It consumes the living. Conservatives can and should use state power where possible to fight this madness. And we should never apologize for it. God or Satan. To quote the old union song, which side are you on?⁵¹

Beyond concerns about the small number of Satanists in the United States, other conservative commentators and politicians have stoked a growing panic about sex “grooming” and a supposed “agenda” by public schools and entertainment companies to indoctrinate children into sexualized lifestyles or to “turn children gay or trans.” Republicans attacked Supreme Court Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson during her confirmation hearings for supposedly being soft on sex traffickers and child molesters. Other commentators and politicians have attacked the Walt Disney company for indoctrinating children into sexualized lifestyles; these attacks have led to calls for boycotts and legislation designed to punish Disney. People have also attacked public school teachers, librarians, and children’s hospitals in reaction to these perceived improprieties.

How widespread are beliefs regarding Satanic cults, child “grooming,” elite sex trafficking, and coordinated “agendas” to sexualize children in the United States?⁵² This answer is “very.” According to our May/June 2022 poll, 25 percent of Americans believe that “Satanic ritual sex abuse is widespread in this country,” 33 percent believe that “Members of Satanic cults secretly abuse thousands of children every year,” and 18 percent believe that “Numerous preschools and public schools secretly engage in Satanic

practices.”⁵³

In 2022, social media platforms began banning discussions of child “grooming” because they were often used to target members of the LGBTQ+ community and accuse them of engaging in pedophilia. Indeed, 28 percent of Americans believe that “There is a secret ‘gay agenda’ aimed at converting young people into gay and trans lifestyles.” The year 2022 also saw many politicians calling for boycotts of Disney; Republicans in Florida even took legislative action against the company. As with concerns about child grooming, these actions are reflective of at least some Americans’ beliefs: 28 percent either strongly agree or agree with the statement that “The Disney Corporation ‘grooms’ children into sexualized lifestyles.”

A likely reason for these sorts of beliefs is that people in recent years have tended to overestimate dangers to children. For example, when asked to estimate the number of children in the United States currently being trafficked for sex, a majority of Americans overestimated the number, and by a large margin.⁵⁴ This makes sense given that political leaders, including members of Congress and other activists, have often made false or unsupported claims about the subject.⁵⁵ We also note that the beliefs discussed above are not concentrated among the political left or right—they traverse partisan and ideological lines.⁵⁶

The beliefs discussed above are only beginning to be polled on, so we cannot make claims about whether they have *increased* or not relative to the height of the satanic panic in the 1980s. Because they speak to the worst evil that people can engage in, accusations of involvement in Satanism, abuse, and secretive sexual agendas aimed at children are powerful cudgels with which to attack political “others.” It may be the case that the rhetoric currently being used by conservatives is designed to activate members of the Republican base or even reach beyond it, given the large numbers of believers among Democrats and Independents. Regardless, acts of vigilantism and violence show that leaders are playing with fire when using such rhetoric to motivate political support.⁵⁷

Curtailing the Spread and Effects of Conspiracy Theories

Social scientists have discovered several ways to address conspiracy

theories and their potential harmful effects. First, *prebunking* involves alerting people to the conspiracy theories that they may encounter in the information environment, potentially making them resistant to those theories.⁵⁸ This strategy is designed to work like traditional vaccines do: exposing people to the conspiracy theories in an inert form in advance of natural exposure helps build an immunity to them.⁵⁹ *Debunking* involves the “correction” of a person’s conspiracy theory belief after the fact. This might involve providing conspiracy theory believers with evidence refuting their theory, usually from epistemic authorities (e.g., scientists, the CDC).⁶⁰ Some scholars have even suggested ridiculing or applying cult-deprogramming techniques to them.⁶¹

Both prebunking and debunking have been found to be effective at curtailing conspiracy theory beliefs, although the effects of these strategies tend to be quite small, substantively speaking. More research must be done to fine-tune these strategies and understand the conditions under which they are most effective. Moreover, there can be drawbacks to the strategies mentioned above. For example, debunking can potentially embolden conspiracy theory believers when they are strongly committed to their beliefs.⁶² If one feels ostracized for one’s conspiracy theory beliefs, they may end up adopting more conspiracy theory beliefs—in other words, the strategy backfires.⁶³

Many researchers have also pointed to education as a way to decrease beliefs in conspiracy theories. In addition to basic intuition, this recommendation stems largely from the consistent correlational relationship between education and conspiracy theory beliefs: higher levels of education are usually associated with lower numbers of conspiracy beliefs.⁶⁴ In particular, critical-thinking skills seem to be effective at reducing one’s susceptibility to or attraction to conspiracy theories.⁶⁵ Other scholars have argued that because feelings of loss and exclusion can drive conspiracy theory beliefs, greater inclusion in the political process could blunt such beliefs.⁶⁶

Policy makers, as opposed to many researchers, are more interested in using government action to address conspiracy theories. Proposals include censoring conspiracy theories, fining or taxing conspiracy theorists, placing undercover government agents into conspiracy theory chatrooms and communities to sow confusion, and the reeducation of conspiracy theory believers.⁶⁷ Censorship, in this context, refers to the government determining in

advance what is not allowed to be said or shared without penalty. It is unclear whether such schemes would accomplish their stated goals or simply be used to stifle discussion of ideas that the ruling class disapproves of.⁶⁸ Nonetheless, it is likely that such government action would aggravate conspiracy theory believers by convincing them that their worst fears are coming true!

In the end, it may be the case that there is no solution to conspiracy theories—certainly no simple one. That said, we may be able to blunt their impact and curb their most egregious excesses.

Conclusion

Conspiracy theories are an enduring facet of the human condition. Just the same, misinformation, disinformation, and fake news are a permanent fixture of our social and political landscapes. There is no time in recorded history when pseudoscientific, paranormal, supernatural, or cryptozoological ideas weren't prevalent. Ultimately, we are unlikely to rid society of ideas that aren't entirely true anytime soon. Still, much of the current social discussion about how to address conspiracy theories and related ideas imagines a world that has been freed of such ideas. Putting aside logistical and philosophical challenges, it is important to consider what we would stand to gain (or lose) if this goal were to be accomplished.

Even though many conspiracy theories are harmless, some can encourage distrust, non-normative behaviors, and even violence. Conspiracy theories can provide fuel for both the good and the bad: righteous rebellions and violent revolutions, necessary investigations into the halls of power and unjustified witch hunts, healthy skepticism and unhealthy pessimism. Conspiracy theories can prompt collaborative action but at the same time discourage cooperation. If one is convinced that their opponents are engaged in a conspiracy against them, negotiation can become nearly impossible.

Democracy can both discourage *conspiracies* and encourage *conspiracy theories*. Electoral competition, government transparency, free speech, and a free press make it difficult for the powerful to conspire without being exposed.⁶⁹ However, these mechanisms themselves are fueled by public skepticism, even conspiracy theories. Powerful people always have abused and always will

abuse their power in self-serving and deleterious ways. Actual conspiracies happen all too often, and conspiracy *theories* are, perhaps, one way to discourage, expose, and foil them.

Current concerns over conspiracy theories have been exacerbated by myriad factors. But regardless of their causes, these concerns are driving calls for regulation, censorship, and in some cases, calls for the government takeover of social media platforms so they can better serve “society’s interests.”⁷⁰ While conspiracy theories make great scapegoats for bitter partisans and moral crusaders alike, there remains little reason to believe that they are to blame, on their own at least, for Brexit, the election of Trump, vaccine refusal, and the January 6 riot. It is unclear if censorship would help curb conspiracy theorizing or merely intensify it. More importantly, it is uncertain whether providing government the power to “regulate” social media, or speech more generally, would actually benefit society or simply be used by the powerful to eliminate critical speech.

Perhaps the most productive way to traverse a world where conspiracy theories prevail is to hold our own beliefs to high standards and show empathy for the people who disagree with us. It would be no small victory if more people were self-aware of their prejudices and predispositions. As professors, we would like to think that education should always be a priority: teaching people to be scientific and critical thinkers should lead to better-evidenced beliefs. We should respect expertise, even when our opinions are at odds with it. Increased government transparency and holding the powerful to account for their actions may ease the need for conspiracy theories, but they cannot eliminate them. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we need to elect leaders who refuse both to take part in conspiracies and to spread conspiracy theories for personal political gain.

Discussion Questions

1. What aspects of conspiracy theorizing do you think require more attention from researchers or even action from governments?
2. What would a world without conspiracy theories look like? Are we better off with or without conspiracy theories?
3. What do you think are the best ways to address conspiracy

theories, and why? Which methods seem problematic? In thinking through this answer, you might consider the role of free speech, civility, violence, and truth.

Key Terms and Concepts

Censorship
Debunking
Incidental Exposure
Infodemic
Prebunking
Post-Truth World
Selective Exposure

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Appendix

Details about US datasets

Table A.1.

Polling Organization	Dates Fielded	Sample Size	Sample/Sampling Procedure
CCES	October 2012	1,230	Opt-in YouGov panelists; weighted to be representative
SSI	July 2016	3,529	Quota sample; stratified to be representative
CCES	October 2016 (1)	1,000	Opt-in YouGov panelists; weighted to be representative
CCES	October 2016 (2)	1,000	Opt-in YouGov panelists; weighted to be representative
CCES	October 2018 (1)	1,000	Opt-in YouGov panelists; weighted to be representative
CCES	October 2018 (2)	1,000	Opt-in YouGov panelists; weighted to be representative
CCES	October 2018 (3)	1,000	Opt-in YouGov panelists; weighted to be representative
Lucid	March 2019	1,012	Quota sample; stratified to be representative
Qualtrics	July 2019	2,000	Quota sample; stratified to be

Female	51	50	51	51	53	52	54	52	52	
White		67	68	60	74	65	77	72	63	
Black	72	14	14	17	11	15	14	12	12	
Hispanic	16	16	17	27	12	18	12	6	16	
n		2,021	2,015	1,040	3,019	2,023	1,056	2,136	1,574	
Characteristics	Qualtrics	Qualtrics	Lucid	CCES	CCES	CCES	CCES	CCES	SSI	CCES
	Sept.	Jul.	March	Oct.	Oct.	Oct.	Oct.	Oct.	Jul.	Oct.
	2019	2019	2019	2018,	2018,	2018,	2016,	2016,	2016	2012
				3	2	1	2	1		
Age	47	50	44	48	47	48	47	48	54	47
High school degree	97	99	90	85	91	91	89	89	99	89
Some college +	73	60	75	62	63	63	59	59	79	59
Female	49	52	52	52	52	52	52	52	62	52
White	75	62	72	70	71	70	74	73	77	73
Black	13	14	13	13	13	13	12	12	14	12
Hispanic	7	16	12	9	8	9	10	6	17	8
n	4,086	2,000	1,012	1,000	1,000	1,000	1,000	1,000	3,529	1,230

Note: All entries are percentages except age, which is the median. All analyses employing CCES and NORC data use survey weights.

Question wording for Figure 5.4

The following were all answered using a five-point scale ranging from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (5), with a midpoint of “neither agree, nor disagree” (3). The survey each question was fielded on appears in parentheses.

1. Jeffrey Epstein, the billionaire accused of running an elite sex trafficking ring, was murdered to cover up the activities of his criminal network. (Qualtrics, May 2021)
2. The US government is mandating the switch to compact fluorescent light bulbs because such lights make people more obedient and easier to control. (Qualtrics, May 2021)
3. The Food and Drug Administration is deliberately preventing the public from getting natural cures for cancer and other diseases because of pressure from drug companies. (Qualtrics, May 2021)
4. Billionaire George Soros is behind a hidden plot to destabilize the American government, take control of the media, and put the world under his control. (Qualtrics, May 2021)

5. Some people are hiding the truth about the December 14, 2012, school shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary in order to advance a political agenda. (Qualtrics, May 2021)
6. Bill Gates is behind the coronavirus pandemic. (Qualtrics, May 2021)
7. Health officials know that cell phones cause cancer but are doing nothing to stop it because large corporations won't let them. (Qualtrics, May 2021)
8. President Trump is covering up the extent of his COVID-19 infection. (Qualtrics, October 2020)
9. President Trump is faking COVID-19 in order to help his chances at reelection. (Qualtrics, October 2020)
10. Groups wanting to hurt President Trump intentionally infected him with COVID-19. (Qualtrics, October 2020)
11. Elites from government and Hollywood are engaged in a massive child sex trafficking racket. (Qualtrics, October 2020)
12. There is a "deep state" embedded in the government that operates in secret and without oversight. (Qualtrics, October 2020)
13. The dangers of vaccines are being hidden by the medical establishment. (Qualtrics, October 2020)
14. School shootings, like those at Sandy Hook, Connecticut, and Parkland, Florida, are false flag attacks perpetrated by the government. (Qualtrics, October 2020)
15. Republicans won the presidential elections in 2016, 2004, and 2000 by stealing them. (Qualtrics, October 2020)
16. The dangers of 5G cell phone technology are being covered up. (Qualtrics, October 2020)
17. Climate change is a hoax perpetrated by corrupt scientists and politicians. (Qualtrics, October 2020)
18. The threat of coronavirus has been exaggerated by political groups who want to damage President Trump. (Qualtrics, October 2020)
19. There is a conspiracy to stop the US Post Office from processing mail-in ballots. (Qualtrics, October 2020)
20. Coronavirus was purposely created and released by powerful people as part of a conspiracy. (Qualtrics, June 2020)
21. The coronavirus is being used to force a dangerous and unnecessary vaccine on Americans. (Qualtrics, June 2020)
22. The coronavirus is being used to install tracking devices

- inside our bodies. (Qualtrics, June 2020)
23. Regardless of who is officially in charge of governments and other organizations, there is a single group of people who secretly control events and rule the world together. (Qualtrics, March 2020)
 24. The dangers of genetically modified foods are being hidden from the public. (Qualtrics, March 2020)
 25. Humans have made contact with aliens, and this fact has been deliberately hidden from the public. (Qualtrics, March 2020)
 26. President Kennedy was killed by a conspiracy rather than by a lone gunman. (Qualtrics, March 2020)
 27. Russia has compromising information about Donald Trump and has used Trump as a foreign asset. (Qualtrics, March 2020)
 28. A powerful family, the Rothschilds, through their wealth, controls governments, wars, and many countries' economies. (Qualtrics, March 2020)
 29. The AIDS virus was created and spread around the world on purpose by a secret organization. (Qualtrics, March 2020)
 30. Barack Obama faked his citizenship to become president. (Qualtrics, March 2020)
 31. The number of Jews killed by the Nazis during World War II has been exaggerated on purpose. (Qualtrics, March 2020)
 32. The true cures for cancer are being hidden by the medical establishment. (Qualtrics, July 2019)
 33. The 1969 moon landing was faked by the US government. (Qualtrics, July 2019)
 34. Some group, other than Al-Qaeda terrorists, is responsible for the attacks of 9/11/2001. (CCES, 2018 [1])

The following were all answered using four-point scales ranging from “definitely” not true (1) to “definitely” true (4), with options of “probably” not true (2) and “probably” true (3) in the middle. The survey each question was fielded on appears in parentheses.

1. Some people believe that a group of Russian operatives are secretly manipulating or directing national policy. Some people do not believe this. What do you think? (CCES, 2018 [3])
2. Some people believe that the Mueller investigation is not, in

fact, an investigation into the Trump campaign's collusion with the Russian government. Instead, they believe it is an investigation into nefarious activities, including child molestation and a variety of other crimes, perpetrated by the Clintons, Barack Obama, and other unelected people who are currently working behind the scenes to run the government. Others do not believe this. What do you think? (CCES, 2018 [3])

3. Some people believe that the largest banks in the US manipulate the economy for their financial gain. Others do not believe this. What do you think? (CCES, 2016 [2])
4. Some people say that when Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast in the summer of 2005, the federal government intentionally breached flood levees in New Orleans so that poor neighborhoods would be flooded and middle class neighborhoods would be spared. (CCES, 2016 [2])
5. Some people believe that the Bush administration faked employment statistics in 2007 to obscure the seriousness of the financial crisis and to protect the US banking industry and Republicans running for re-election in 2008. Others do not believe this. What do you think? (CCES, 2016 [2])
6. Some people believe that Donald Trump has made a secret deal with the president of Russia, Vladimir Putin, such that if Putin helps Trump become president, the Trump administration will enact policies very favorable to Russia. Others do not believe this. What do you think? (CCES, 2016 [2])
7. Some people believe that Hillary Clinton was not diagnosed with pneumonia but that the Russian government poisoned her because they do not want her to be elected president of the United States. Others do not believe this. What do you think? (CCES, 2016 [2])
8. Some people believe that the billionaire Koch brothers are behind a hidden plot to destabilize the American government and put the world under their control. Others do not believe this. What do you think? (CCES, 2016 [2])

The following were all answered using dichotomous response options (in italics next to each question). "Don't know" responses are coded as missing. The survey each question was fielded on

appears in parentheses.

1. Do you feel that the assassination of Senator Robert Kennedy was the act of one individual or part of a larger conspiracy? *Act of one individual; Part of larger conspiracy* (Qualtrics, May 2021)
2. Do you think there was a police conspiracy to frame O.J. Simpson, or not? *Yes; No* (Qualtrics, May 2021)
3. Do you think the US government has engaged in the assassination of entertainers who have tried to spread a counterculture message it didn't like, such as John Lennon, Kurt Cobain, Tupac Shakur, and others, or not? *Yes; No* (Qualtrics, May 2021)
4. Do you think that the Reagan campaign made a deal with the Iranians to hold the American hostages in Iran until after the 1980 presidential election, or not? *Yes; No* (Qualtrics, May 2021)
5. Do you believe the government adds fluoride to our water supply, not for dental health reasons but for other, more sinister reasons, or not? *Do; Do not* (Qualtrics, May 2021)
6. Do you feel that the assassination of Martin Luther King was the act of one individual or part of a larger conspiracy? *Act of one individual; Part of larger conspiracy* (Qualtrics, May 2021)
7. Do you believe media or the government adds secret mind-controlling technology to television broadcast signals, or not? *Do; Do not* (Qualtrics, May 2021)
8. Do you believe that the pharmaceutical industry is in league with the medical industry to "invent" new diseases in order to make money, or not? *Do; Do not* (Qualtrics, May 2021)
9. Some people have argued that President Franklin D. Roosevelt knew about Japanese plans to bomb Pearl Harbor but did nothing about it because he wanted an excuse to involve the United States on the side of the Allies in the war. From what you know or have read, do you agree or disagree with this point of view? *Agree; Disagree* (Qualtrics, May 2021)
10. Do you think there is, or is not, a national conspiracy to kill police? *Is; Is not* (Qualtrics, May 2021)

Notes

Chapter 1

1 Meagan Flynn, “Engineer Intentionally Crashes Train near Hospital Ship Mercy, Believing in Weird Coronavirus Conspiracy, Feds Say,” *Washington Post*, April 2, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/04/02/train-derails-usns-mercy-coronavirus>.

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